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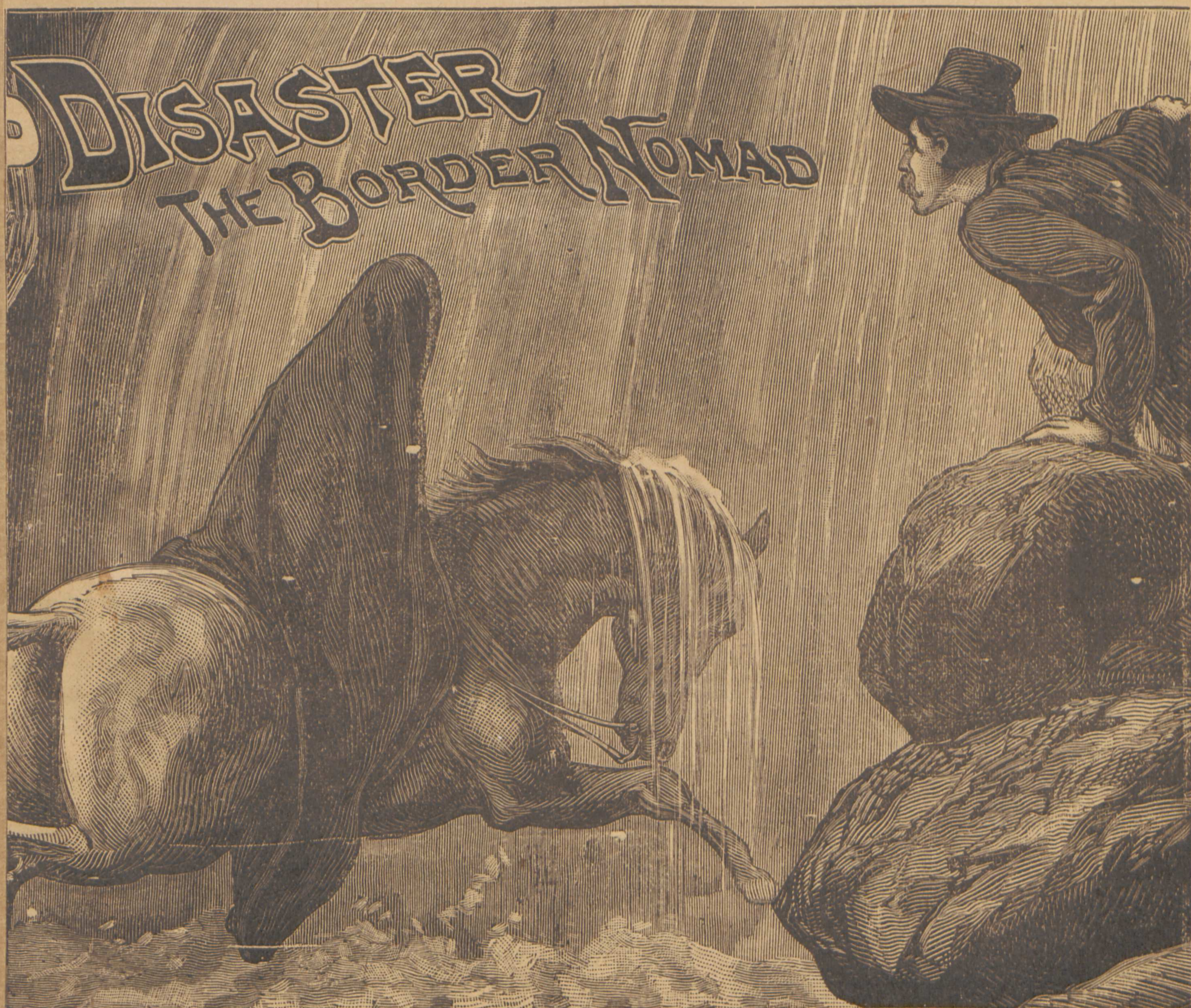
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Vol. XXXIII.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN.

SHARPER STOKES' DOUBLE DEAL;

OR,



THE ANIMAL SPRUNG FORWARD AND DISAPPEARED WITH ITS YOUNG RIDER BENEATH THE TORRENT OF WATER.

Sharper Stokes' Double Deal;

OR,

Old Disaster the Border Nomad

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,

AUTHOR OF "VIOLET VANE" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DARK DEED.

DEEP down within a secluded "pocket," amid the Black Hills, burned a cheerful camp-fire one summer night. The glade in which the fire blazed was sheltered by pine trees which prevented the light from being seen at a distance.

Near the fire sat four bronzed and bearded men. The youngest was not more than twenty-three years of age, a tall, handsome fellow with blue eyes and a winning face. He was attired in a stout, serviceable suit, and the belt beneath his coat contained a brace of revolvers and a short-bladed knife. A Winchester rifle lay upon the ground within easy reach of his hand. This was Ethan Sherman.

Near Sherman, reclining upon his side, his elbow upon the ground and his head resting upon his hand, was Albion Junardo, a man apparently forty years of age. He was dressed nearly the same as Sherman, his pantaloons being tucked into the tops of a pair of boots. A full beard covered his face. He always wore his hat pulled well down over his eyes, twin orbs which peered from beneath the hat-brim in a sharp, searching manner. Junardo was a rather mysterious man who had little to say about himself, although naturally quite voluble. He did not possess a rifle, nor carry visible weapons, although his companions were well aware that he could produce a self-acting revolver with lightning-like swiftness.

Beyond Junardo reclined another man whose face was concealed by a full beard, and who also wore his hat pulled down over his eyes. He was a heavy-built fellow of medium height, whose every movement betrayed great physical power. He was dressed in a half-hunting, half-mining suit, and wore a belt which supported several handsome weapons. His rifle leaned against a small tree near at hand.

This man gave his name as Flavus Stokes.

The fourth one of the party was a little round-shouldered, spare man, who was at least sixty years of age. He was dressed in a well-worn buckskin suit, which fitted his emaciated form closely, making him look even thinner than he actually was. His belt contained a brace of ancient-appearing revolvers and a long knife. Near at hand lay a long-barreled old rifle, which looked as if it had seen hard usage. This wood veteran's thin face was covered by a scraggy beard, his large mouth was drawn downward at the corners, in a lugubrious expression, but which was given the lie by the merry twinkle of his steel-blue eyes.

Far and wide this border nomad was known as Old Disaster. In modern parlance the old man would have been called a "crank." He took a melancholy pride in relating his many accidents and misadventures. His store of anecdotes seemed inexhaustible, and, some who knew him were inclined to believe that his imagination was responsible for many of his astonishing tales.

Rumor located the cave of the Gold Genii somewhere amid the Black Hills, beyond the weird "Bad Lands," and the sight of big nuggets in the possession of the red-men, who had access to the Hills, led many to believe the wild and wonderful tales.

More than one expedition, it was known, had set out to discover the cavern, but, the admitted fact that not a man ever returned to tell of success or failure, immensely intensified the interest in the matter. Although the Indians professed to be friendly, the pale-face found within the heart of their Reservation never again reappeared among his kindred!

The discovery of gold within the Hills sent hundreds of fortune-seekers into the "promised land," regardless of Government interference or Sioux scalping-knife, and the discovery of the cave of gold was regarded as a possibility.

The party of four had started to search for this cave. From a dying red-skin whom he had befriended, Old Disaster had obtained such information as led him to think he could find the wondrous cavern. The old man had met Ethan Sherman and liked him. He resolved to take the young fellow along as a companion. Their plans were accidentally overheard by

Junardo, who made the fact known, and while protesting that he did not wish to urge himself upon them, said he would like to be one of the expedition. After some deliberation, they agreed to take him, feeling that it would make them stronger should they have trouble with Indians. Stokes was picked up by the way, and he, too, clung to them like a leech.

As the night wind whispered softly amid the pines above their heads, the four fortune-seekers gazed silently into the fire with various emotions stirring within their breasts. Old Disaster pulled vigorously at the black pipe which he was smoking, his fanciful brain filled with visions of his past venturesome life, and conjuring some new and startling anecdote with which to set the party into laughter or fill them with wonder.

Stokes's thoughts must have been of a peculiar nature, for he would occasionally glance searchingly at his companions as if fearing they could read his mind.

Junardo's face was grave and unfathomable. He gazed steadily into the leaping flames, as if seeing there something which fascinated him.

Sherman also saw visions in the leaping lights and shadows, but everything resolved into a beautiful face which seemed to smile sweetly but sadly upon him. Within the young man's heart there was a constant pain—a dread—which redoubled as he gazed at that fair face in the fire. He almost forgot himself and cried aloud the dear name which kept sounding within his brain.

Suddenly the voice of Old Disaster broke the spell.

"Ju fellers ever heer o' ther time I war blowed all ter pieces in that 'ar steamboat kersplosion?" he inquired, removing the pipe and spitting spitefully in the fire. "That war 'bout ther wust disaster this ole piece o' humanity ever tuck er slice of. Howlin' tomcats! It makes me turn cold frum head ter fut just ter think o' it."

The old trapper of the hills and prairies paused long enough to take a pull at the pipe and glance swiftly around at his companions; then he resumed:

"That war on the ole Mississip'. I war blown plum up ergin' the stars, my lef' arm an' three ribs war broke, my right shoulder relocated, a pine board three inches wide war druv plum through my lef' lung an' my whole anterior system war clean knocked askew; yet that axident saved my life!"

After making this startling assertion, Disaster relapsed into silence and gazed solemnly at the fire, well knowing that his listeners' curiosity would demand to have the rest of the story.

"How was that, Disaster?" asked Stokes.

"Waal," drawled the old fellow, his eyes twinkling, but the corners of his mouth crawling a trifle lower, "I war playin' poker w'en the kersplosion tuck place—that is, I had been playin', but jist then war sayin' my prayers an' preparin' ter cross ther Styg'an River, as ther poic sez. It cum' erbout like ter this:

"I had got inter er leetle trubble wi' Dandy Drake over er woman. I uster beer condemned, mule-headed, soft-brained fool over every blessed petticoat I run acrost; but ther ole man's got over that! Drake war er river shark—made his livin' at keerds; but I never war no slouch wi' pasteboards. As I sed, we hed sum' trubble. Ther gambler war ole lightnin' on ther shoot, but I got ther drop. Then he challenged me ter fight, an' of course I picked ther weppins. I knew him ter be er dead shot, an' 'twas more'n likely we'd both go under if it war pistols. I war pritty 'tarnal good with keerds, ez I sed afore, an' I named them fur weppins. Ther one who went broke fust war ter stake his life, an' ef beaten ther other war ter count three, at which pint ther loser war ter blow out his own brains!

"Ther game begun, an' fur more'n a nour it was nip an' tuck. Bumby I got a big han'—four queens an' a king. As we warn't playin' straights, I knew ther war only jist one han' in ther pack as c'd down me—four aces. Ther chances thet Dandy Drake held four aces war one in hundreds, but it soon grew plain thet he had a big fist, fur he raised me every time. We putt up ev'ry cent we had, an' then I hope ter be blessed ef we didn't both stake our lives! He called an' I laid my han'. Then he putt down his, an' by ther beard o' Moses! he had ther four aces!

"It looked then ez if I'd run ag'in' my last disaster. Drake guv me one minute to say over my prayers. He putt er pistol inter my han' an' held me kivered wi' ernuther, swarin' all ther time ez how he'd do ther job ef I didn't stan' by ther 'greement. He had counted two

an' I had ther pistol at my own head w'en ther ole b'iler bu'st. Ther next I knew my mutilated remains war bein' pasted tergether by a doctor, an' I war in bed sum'w'eres on ther shore.

"I've never met ther gambler frum that day ter this, nor hev I met any one who has seen him since ther kersplosion. I war reddy ter kerri out my part o' ther 'greement, but I'll never do it till he counts three. Ther word war rollin' down his tongue w'en ther luckiest disaster o' my life tuck place."

"And so you survived your dreadful wounds?" Stokes queried.

"No, I didn't," snapped the old man. "I never duner thing ter my woun's. Ther doctor 'tended ter them; but I got well jist ther same."

Stokes laughed a little at Disaster's story, but Junardo and Sherman were silent, evidently occupied with their thoughts. The old border tramp noticed this, and uttering a peculiar grunt, relapsed into silence.

Little more was said ere three of the men wrapped themselves in their blankets, preparatory to a good night's rest, leaving the fourth, Flavus Stokes, on guard.

Slowly the hours wore away. Coyotes barked in the distance, the night breeze whispered among the pines, the fire sunk lower and lower. The guard, who had sat down at the foot of a tree, seemed to finally succumb to a feeling of drowsiness and fall asleep.

The sleepers dreamed and whispered of loved ones far away. There was one who little knew of the deadly danger that menaced him. No guardian angel whispered a warning in his ear. He slept on.

Not far from midnight Disaster was awakened by being fiercely shaken.

"Wake up!" cried a voice in his ear. "Wake up, man, for God's sake! Murder!"

"Horn o' Gabriel! W'at's ther matter?" gasped the veteran, as he sprung up.

"Murder!" repeated Stokes, as he pointed toward a motionless form that lay within the dim circle of light made by the dying embers. "Look there!"

CHAPTER II.

STRANGE AND STARTLING OCCURRENCES.

WITH one sidelong scrape of his foot Old Disaster raked together several half-burned brands and kicked them upon the coals. A small flame instantly blazed up, and by the light thus obtained, the old plainsman saw the haft of a knife which was apparently buried to the hilt in the breast of the motionless man.

The victim was Albion Junardo!

The unfortunate man had been struck dead while he slept. He had made no outcry, although it was evident that there had been a slight struggle.

As Disaster bent over the silent form he saw that the dark, heavy beard which Junardo wore was partially detached from his face. The beard was false!

At once the old scout removed the beard, revealing a smooth-shaved, determined-appearing face.

"Sword o' Goliath!" gasped Old Disaster.

Stokes said not a word, although he gazed upon the unmasked face with evident emotion. For several seconds the two men were silent. Finally the old man declared:

"This 'ar clean knocks me eendwise."

"He was in disguise."

"Waal, I sh'u'd segashiate!"

"It was a foul murder!"

"Yes; he's run plum ag'in' his last disaster. This was a foul deal, pardner, an' no mistake. But, look hyer!—hyer are finger-marks on his throat!"

"Where the murderer held him and prevented an outcry while he did his work. Disaster, old man, this is a black piece of business."

"Whar is Ethan Sherman?" demanded the veteran borderman, as he glanced around.

Stokes shook his head.

"You tell!" he said, significantly.

For a moment Disaster seemed dazed. He gazed searchingly around; then his eyes rested on his companion's face, with a half-beseeking light in their depths.

"No, no!" he faltered; "you can't think that o' ther lad! He didn't do it—rod of Aaron, no!"

"Where is he?" demanded Stokes.

Disaster shook his head feebly. The night-wind, as it moaned amid the pines, was the only answer.

"He has fled," Stokes added; "fled like a crime-stained coward who dared not remain in the presence of his victim. It looks rather dark for that young man."

"I can't believe it," persisted the old man.

"He war an honest-actin' young feller. He kem ter these 'ar hills ter s'arch fer his sweet-heart, who, sum thort, war murdered in the Red Canyon massacre wi' her father an' mother. I tell ye, Stokes, it c'dn't 'a' been him!"

"Then, who was it? I sat down at the foot of that tree on guard, but, being very sleepy, finally lost my senses in slumber. How long I slept I cannot tell; but, suddenly I awoke. By the dying firelight I saw the knife in Junardo's breast. I sprung up and aroused you. We find Sherman gone and Junardo murdered. What are we to think!"

Again Disaster shook his head. He was not ready to believe Sherman guilty, yet he knew not what to think.

"The knife may tell us something," continued Stokes, as he picked up a blazing brand and held it so that the light fell upon the haft of the weapon. "Look at it close, old man!"

The old ranger knelt and gazed searchingly at the tell-tale knife. A despairing groan broke from his lips.

"Sword o' Goliath!"

"What is it?" eagerly demanded Stokes.

"It's ther boyee's knife!" admitted the old man. "Hyer's his initials on ther handle."

"That is proof enough. There is no doubt now but that Sherman is the murderer."

"I'm afeard not. I hav' been deceived by ther lad. But, what in ther name o' ther powers did he kill Junardo fer?"

"That is a mystery; I cannot explain it."

Then the two men were silent as they gazed steadily at the motionless form at their feet.

The fire flared unsteadily, and strange grotesque shadows seemed flitting here and there amid the pines. The wind moaned plaintively overhead. Soft footsteps were moving along the ground near at hand, and many of the shadows assumed the forms of Indian warriors, half a score of whom seemed to float out of the darkness beyond the circle of light made by the camp-fire.

Then the night-air was rent by the war-cry of the Sioux!

Stokes and Disaster were surrounded by deadly foes. An echoing yell burst from the lips of the old man as he seized his rifle and fired a single shot. Then, round and round his head swept the heavy weapon, as he sprung into the midst of his savage foes.

"Howlin', tearin' tomcats!" he shouted. "Ther varmints are upon us! Wake, tornadoes an' blizzards, an' let yerselves loose! Ho, smoky skins! ye hav' run ag'in' er reg'ler ragin' disaster. Pile inter'em, Stokesy; show'em ther kind o' stuff ye'r made of! Power o' ole Goliath! w'at er blessed picnic!"

The heavy rifle swept down the Indians as if they were blades of grass. Howls of surprise and dismay came from their throats. With one accord they turned their attention toward Disaster, and, regardless of the old man's peril, Stokes fled away through the pines.

Disaster witnessed the coward's flight, and yelled after him:

"Go, you measly cur! Hoof it, you chicken-hearted coot! Don't bother 'bout me; Ole Disaster kin took care o' hisself."

And for a few minutes he did seem fully a match for his many foes, but they pressed him closer and closer, seeming determined not to hurt him, but to make him a captive. But the reckless old borderman was wonderfully hard to capture.

"Hold hard, ye dirty varmints!" he shouted. "Don't press a feller too close. I never c'd stan' it to hav' er smoky-skin very near. Stan' off! stan' off, I say, or sum' o' ye will wear cracked heads. Jeewhiz! what a time this is! Whangho! most assuredly so!"

Suddenly a shrill yell near at hand electrified the combatants. The next instant a wild-appearing man dashed among the astounded redskins, hurling them to the right and left like so many children. His head was bare and his long white hair fell upon his shoulders. His beard was also long and white.

Halting in the midst of the amazed savages, the strange man threw his hands above his head and instantly a sheet of red flame seemed to leap from his clinched fists and overhang the heads of the cowering Indians.

Uttering yells of terror, the panic-stricken Sioux fled into the darkness, pursued by a burst of almost maniacal laughter.

"Flee, unhallowed miscreants!" cried the mysterious man, in a full, thrilling voice. "Flee from the just vengeance of an avenging God! The blood of your many victims cries to heaven for vengeance, and the wrath of the Most High cannot be long delayed!"

Then, without appearing to notice Old Disaster,

the strange man advanced to the side of the motionless Junardo. Stooping, he gazed sharply into the man's face, then he placed one hand upon Junardo's breast beneath the blanket. A moment later he uttered a subdued exclamation, and stooping swiftly, lifted the body in his arms. Turning, he strode away into the darkness, bearing the strange burden with him.

"Ghost o' ole Goliath!" gasped Old Disaster. "That's jest w'at knocks me eendwise. Waal, I sh'u'd segashiate! Who in ther name o' sin war thet?"

But the old man found himself unable to answer his own question.

"I'm goin' ter foller yer, mer jolly ole Injin terror!" he added. "I'll trail ye to yer hole, or until ye drap thet corpus."

And, like a shadow, Old Disaster glided away in the footsteps of the stranger. With the noiseless tread of a panther he glided among the trees, keeping so near the fleeing man that he was almost wholly guided by the sounds of his heavy tread.

Ten minutes carried them beyond the timber, but still the pursued and pursuer pressed on, until two miles at least were traversed; then the mysterious man plunged into the mouth of a narrow ravine that led downward. The trailer persisted in the pursuit. Onward they went like two shadows, but, as they continued, the shadows grew denser, until—

How it happened Old Disaster could never tell, but, suddenly, the man he was following vanished as completely as if he had sunk into the earth!

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERIES OF DISMAL GORGE.

FAR down within a narrow ravine within the very heart of the hills, three venturesome miners had found a deserted cabin, the open door of which swung slowly back and forth before the wind that sucked through the compressed gorge. The ravine was a dismal place, indeed, and the ghostly, repellent look about the old hut actually caused the three men to shiver when they first perceived it. But, they were all brave fellows, and, after examining the place, resolved to spend the night there.

Within twenty rods of the deserted cabin they found several partially rotten sluice-boxes. Investigation revealed the fact that they had stumbled upon a paying placer, which, at some time, had been worked. Whether the original discoverers had been driven away or murdered by the Indians, was an unanswerable question; but, it was apparent that something of a very imperative nature had caused them to cease working their discovery.

The three miners decided that they had struck the place to secure the fortune for which they were in quest. They took possession of the cabin, repaired the sluices, and began work. At the end of the first day's labor, they found that they had secured more "dust" and tiny nuggets than they had expected to obtain.

Their names were Eben Stone, Jabez Cobb and Justin Jackwood.

Stone was a grizzled veteran of the California excitement, when fortunes were made and lost in a single day. He was a quaint, weather-tanned old man, who looked as if he had been beaten and tossed by life's severest storms. In truth, he had experienced many of the "ups and downs" of life, for he spoke truthfully when he declared that no less than three times had he been the possessor of a fortune.

But, Eben Stone was not the kind of a man who could endure prosperity. Early in life he had become inured to hardships, and asserted that he actually could not endure a life of luxury and plenty. His three fortunes had vanished almost as swiftly as they had been obtained, and now the restless old prospector found himself eagerly searching for a fourth.

Cobb was also a miner, one who had been on the very crest of the tidal-wave that swept toward Pike's Peak during the first wild rush just after rich gold discoveries in that vicinity were made known. He was a rugged man, very stout, but decidedly slow of movement. When he spoke, his words were uttered in a lazy, drawing manner, not unpleasant to the ear, which seemed to tell of a good-natured, peace-loving soul.

He had not been as lucky as Stone in the way of securing fortunes, but, having once secured enough to place him in comfortable circumstances for life, Jabez was a man who would settle down and enjoy his competence. He had none of the restless, unstable spirit which characterized Stone.

Justin Jackwood was a young man; just what his age was was hard to determine. He was

surely more than twenty, and less than thirty; but the full, brown beard which he wore either made him look older or younger than he was. He was a compactly-built fellow of medium height, and with his great strength was also united the quickness of a panther. In feats of strength Jabez Cobb would have been more than a match for Jackwood; but, in a rough-and-tumble struggle, Jackwood would have been the better man.

Jackwood's companions knew little of his early life. That he was well-educated and refined was apparent, but he was strangely reticent concerning himself. In fact, there was a mysterious something about the young man which impressed those who associated with him. At times he would be moody and silent, scarcely speaking for a day or two. He acted as if troubled by some unpleasant memory.

The three miners gave the lonely ravine an appropriate name—Dismal Gorge. But little cared they how dismal the place was as long as the placer continued to yield its valuable deposits liberally.

The day after their discovery of the deserted cabin, while they were eating their dinner, they were startled by what seemed to be a heavy but muffled explosion, and, strange to tell, the sound seemed to come from beneath their very feet! They looked at each other in amazement.

"What war thet?" demanded Stone.

"Ask me sumptin' easy," drawled Cobb.

Jackwood started up and went to the door. In vain he scanned the strip of blue sky to be seen above. Not a cloud was visible.

"It sounded like a heavy powder explosion; still it might have been thunder," he said. "There is not a cloud overhead, but of course I cannot scan the horizon. Thunder-storms arise with remarkable swiftness among the Hills."

"Thet warn't no thunder," asserted Cobb.

"Not much!" Stone agreed. "I felt ther groun' shake. It struck me more like an 'arthquake'."

"The sound did seem to come from below," Jackwood admitted; "but, we may have been deceived."

"It sounded ter me like er heavy 'splosion undergroun'," averred the old miner. "I hev hev heard sech sou'n's fore now, often."

"It did sound like er blast," admitted Cobb. "But thet don't explain it, by any means."

"Well, I'm not going to lose my dinner while I puzzle over it," laughed Jackwood.

That very day, just as they ceased working at dusk, they heard the sound again. There came a sullen, heavy rumble apparently from beneath their feet, accompanied by a slight but perceptible jarring. The three men gazed into each other's faces in amazement.

"There!" exclaimed Jackwood; "what do you make out of that?"

Cobb shook his head, while the old Californian looked decidedly uneasy.

"It knocks me," he declared. "Pr'aps this blamed ole hole ar' ha'nted."

"Oh, cum now," drawled Jabez. "you don't go fer ter take any stock in ha'nts?"

The miner looked offended.

"Pr'aps I don't," he said, shortly. "I'm er pritty ole man an' I've see'd er few things door-in' my 'arthly career, sum o' which no mortal man kin account fer. There are some 'tarnal queer things as sumtimes take place. Who knows but ther 'riginal diskiverers o' this place was druv away by suthin' connected by these very sou'n's as we've heerd?"

The others did not reply. They were quite mystified, but were not inclined to attribute the sounds they had heard to any supernatural cause. Stone was inclined to be "set" in his convictions, and the more they opposed the idea of the sounds being of ghostly origin the firmer became his belief that they were.

But they were soon confronted by another mystery.

Once or twice in the silent hours of the night they thought they heard the sounds of stealthy footsteps moving near the cabin. More than once Jackwood arose and investigated, but found nothing.

One night they were all simultaneously aroused by the sharp hoof-strokes of a galloping horse, as it dashed past the cabin. With one accord they sat up, then Cobb sprung to the trap-window, flung it open and peered out into the darkness.

He saw nothing.

Cautioning his companions to remain silent, he listened and heard the hoof-strokes of a horse dying out in the distance up the ravine.

The miners now became a trifle excited and alarmed. Cobb and Jackwood believed that they

were being spied upon, but Stone was inclined to attribute everything to supernatural agencies.

Several times they heard the hoof-strokes of the phantom horse in the dead hours of the night. One night Jackwood sat up and kept watch, but the horse did not appear. This served to convince the superstitious old miner that he was right in his belief.

Jackwood now slept on the alert, ready to spring up at the slightest sound, and after repeated attempts, succeeded in catching a glimpse of the animal which disturbed their slumbers. Like the wind, a white horse and dark rider swept by the cabin. Jackwood opened the door and listened until he was sure the horse had reached a high waterfall some distance up the ravine. The sound of hoof-strokes ceased at that point. A peculiar smile rested on the young fellow's face, for he well knew that a horse could not pass the fall.

"Partners," he said, as he entered the cabin and confronted Stone and Cobb, who were wide awake, "I have seen the phantom horse! Phantoms are usually white, I believe; therefore, Stone will be pleased when I tell him that this strange creature which disturbs our slumbers so often is white—a white horse."

Stone nodded vigorously.

"I knowed it," he declared.

"But," continued the young man, "on this strange animal's back rides a form which looked anything but ghostly during the brief time which it was visible to me. It appeared more like a dark-clothed human being of rather small stature."

The old miner uttered an unmeaning grunt.

"What do you think—a spy?" asked Cobb.

"I don't know as to that," Jackwood admitted. "Possibly. One thing is certain: That horse did not follow this ravine beyond the waterfall. I listened to his hoof-strokes until he reached that point, where they seemed to cease."

"How do you account for that?"

"Don't ask too many questions now, laughed the young man. "I have determined to thoroughly investigate this affair, and I hope to explain everything to you within three days."

Jackwood applied himself vigorously to his self-imposed task. Night and day he was on the alert, hoping to make some new discovery. He spent time enough to go up and look around the waterfall. There he found that he was right in the belief that a horse could not pass the waterfall so as to follow the gorge beyond.

Where did the mysterious horse and rider go?

Justin examined the ground beside the stream, and, after a time, succeeded in finding the prints of a horse's feet at the very edge of the water.

The animal might have paused there to drink, but appearances indicated that it had entered the stream. But, after entering the water, where had it gone?

Jackwood returned still puzzled, although he asserted that he was on the scent.

That very day, while at work in the sluices, the three miners heard a clatter of hoofs. Looking up they were amazed to see a white horse and rider sweeping down the ravine.

Cobb uttered a cry of surprise, and Stone one of mingled consternation and amazement. Jackwood gave vent to an exclamation indicative of both surprise and delight.

"Look there!" cried the young man. "Look sharp, Stone, and you will see your 'ha'nt.' Do that horse and its rider appear like *spooks*?"

The horse was snowy white—a beautiful animal. Its rider appeared to be a boy of fifteen or sixteen. He was dressed in a dark, velvety-appearing suit, trimmed with gold lace. The hat upon his head was encircled by a gold cord, and around his waist was a scarlet sash, the loose ends of which trailed behind him as the horse swept along.

As the mysterious boy rider came opposite, Jackwood hailed. The boy did not appear to hear the call and the young man repeated it. Still the strange boy rode on. Past them he swept and away down the ravine without turning his head or uttering a word.

"Well, Stone," said Jackwood, when horse and rider had passed from view, "what do you think of the ghost?"

"I may have been wrong," the old miner admitted, "but whar duz this hyer boy an' hoss cum from an' go ter?"

"I cannot answer that, now," responded the young man, "but I will do so before I again close my eyes in slumber. I am going to watch by the waterfall to-night."

Jackwood kept his word. He was not forced to remain awake very late that night, for the

mysterious boy returned at an early hour. Crouching behind a boulder near the fall, the spy listened to the approaching horse.

"Now to solve the mystery!" was his mental exclamation.

The white horse and its rider soon came into view. Straight toward the concealed man they advanced, until the fall was almost reached, then the horse entered the stream.

From his place of concealment, Jackwood saw the boy produce and adjust about him a long flowing garment that concealed him from head to foot. As the stranger lad did so, there came to the watcher's ears a peculiar rustle, which plainly told that the garment was a rubber one.

These arrangements complete, the boy struck the white horse a sharp cut, and, in an instant, the animal sprang forward and disappeared with its young rider beneath the torrent of water that came plunging downward from the jagged, rocky verge above.

CHAPTER IV.

AN OMINOUS WARNING.

JUSTIN JACKWOOD uttered an exclamation of both surprise and satisfaction as he saw the horse and rider disappear beneath the waterfall. He believed that he had thoroughly solved the mystery of the strange horse and rider's mysterious disappearance.

"There must be a cavern of some kind beneath that fall," muttered the young man, "and into that cave went the white horse and boy of the scarlet sash. Ah!"

This last exclamation was uttered as he caught a gleam of light through the falling water. He was tempted to follow the rider beneath the water veil, but his better judgment prevented the dangerous but tempting adventure at that time.

"No," he decided; "I will come here to-morrow, prepared to explore that place. I might get into trouble if I should rush in there now, when all within the place are doubtless on the alert."

The light upon the water disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared. Although Jackwood leaned against the boulder with his eyes fastened upon the fall for a long time, he did not again see anything more of the light.

"The evening's entertainment is evidently closed," muttered the young man. "I may as well retire."

When he reached the cabin he was obliged to arouse his companions to gain admittance, the door being fastened. Of course they demanded to know what he had discovered, and he was obliged to tell them all.

Stone was somewhat shaken in his conviction that there was something supernatural about the horse which they had so often heard in the night, but he persisted that the animal which they had all seen might not be the one whose hoof-strokes had aroused them so often.

Jackwood refrained from ridiculing the old man, for he saw that to do so would arouse the Californian's displeasure. It was apparent that Stone was decidedly "touchy" on certain points.

"Then you are sart'in that thar is a cave o' sum sort under ther falls?" Cobb queried.

"Sure," was Jackwood's laconic reply.

"An' you hev decided ter go in thar?"

"Now you are talking!"

"I'd like ter look ther blamed hole over wi' ye."

"Then you're the very man I want."

"Shake!"

Stone uttered not a word, either of approval or otherwise. He heard the compact in silence, but inwardly made a resolve.

When Jackwood and Cobb started toward the fall the following morning Stone started with them.

"Hullo!" exclaimed the young man. "Are you going, too, my old friend?"

"Bet yer boots!" was the emphatic response.

"But I thought—"

"Don't make no difference *what* ye thort," interrupted the miner, shortly. "We don't know what thar is under that fall. Ye may run ag'in' er roarin' deefikilty an' need ther old man ter help ye out. D'yer s'pose I'm goin' ter lay roun' an' let my pards run their heads into danger? Waal, I guess ye don't know ole Eb Stone!"

"We never doubted your sand, old man," Jackwood hastened to say. "But, we didn't know that you wanted to fool around the hang-out of spooks."

"Oh, dry up!" snorted the miner, indignantly, yet in a good-natured way.

The three reached the waterfall, and Jack-

wood pointed out the precise spot where the horse had disappeared.

"Now, I am going to plunge right in there. I shall get a souse, but I can stand that. You two may follow as close as you please," and without more ado, the young man stepped into the stream, which came nearly to his boot-tops, and waded toward the fall. Within three feet of the falling sheet he paused long enough to nerve himself for the dash; then he sprang forward with his hands outstretched and his companions saw him vanish from view!

For an instant the water dashed over the daring and adventurous fellow; then he found himself behind the torrent. By the mellow light which pierced the water-veil he saw that he was indeed within a cavern, but the light was not sufficient to show him its dimensions. He struck a match and lighted a small pine-knot which he had brought for that purpose. While he was engaged at this, Cobb and Stone came plunging through the drop scene to the hidden retreat.

The pine-knot quickly ignited, and, holding it above his head, Jackwood gazed curiously around. To his surprise he saw that the chamber directly behind the fall was small and deserted. The cavern floor was rough, and strewn with stones of all sizes. The walls were irregular, with sharp jagged rocks thrust out here and there. The air was, of course, heavy with mist, and the walls were dripping with the exuding moisture.

"Waal, hyer we are," drawled Cobb, as he gazed around. "Not a very sedoosin'-lookin' hole, I swan!"

"Whar is ther hoss an' ther boy?" asked Stone, with the evident sarcasm of disbelief.

"That is for us to discover," answered Jackwood, quietly. "It is evident we have not solved all the mystery connected with this strange affair. Let's look this place over a little."

By the light of the pine-knot they advanced together and examined the ragged walls. Inch by inch they surveyed every foot of the dank stones until Jackwood finally paused before what appeared to be a huge boulder set in a casing of stone.

"Were it possible to remove that rock I should believe there was a passage beyond," he declared.

Stone examined this rock and rapped upon it with the hilt of a heavy knife.

"Thet is sot solid inter ther wall," he asserted. "Er thousan' men c'u'dn't move ther durned thing."

"It appears that way," Jackwood admitted.

They continued their inspection, but found nothing that would throw light upon the mystery. Stone said nothing, but his belief that there was something ghostly about the strange circumstances was strengthened. They were finally compelled to leave the cavern beneath the fall, feeling fully as mystified as they were on entering.

"It is certain that no human being could make that damp hole his home," Jackwood declared, as he shook the water from his clothes. "The mystery is as deep as ever, but, I mean to solve it."

When they reached the cabin, to their surprise they found a queer, lean little old man sitting near the door, quietly smoking a very black pipe. He looked up as they approached and called out:

"Howdy, pards! I jist drapped down hyer er few shakes ago, but, ez I didn't fine nobody ter hum, I sot down an' waited fer ther proprietors o' this hyer shebang ter return. It duz me proud ter clap my ole peepers onter ye."

Eben Stone uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Ole Disaster, I swan! W'y, you old varmint, how *are* ye?"

"Do me eyes deceive me?" cried the old nomad. "Am it, or am it not thet hump-backed ole sinner, Eb Stone? Come ter my arms, ye ole wretch, wile I squeeze ther breath out o' yer body!"

Laughing like children, the two men embraced. Then Stone introduced Old Disaster to his companions.

When the veteran borderman had shaken the hands of Cobb and Jackwood, Stone asked:

"How in ther name o' ther wonderful did ye happen erlong hyer, ye little ole runt o' an Injin-extarminator? It has been more'n two years since I hev seen ye."

Then Old Disaster told of the ill-fated expedition to search for the Lost Gold Cave. The three pards listened with interest, but Jackwood seemed more deeply moved than the others. When the narrator told of Junardo's

murder, Sherman's disappearance and Stokes's accusation of the young man, Justin could restrain himself no longer.

"He never did it!" he cried. "Ethan Sherman never committed murder!"

Of course the others were surprised at these almost fiercely spoken words, but when they questioned him concerning Sherman he refused to say a word. It was apparent to them all, however, that Ethan Sherman and Justin Jackwood were not strangers.

Disaster faithfully related the startling events which followed Junardo's murder. The old man had watched and waited near the spot where the mysterious man had disappeared with Junardo's body, and at daybreak had explored the ground faithfully, but his search was fruitless. He found no trace of the white-headed stranger or of Junardo's corpse.

Following the ravine, he had reached and passed the waterfall while the three miners had been in the cavern beneath.

After Disaster had related his adventures, Cobb told him of the incomprehensible things which had occurred since they had occupied the cabin in Dismal Gorge. Jackwood did not attempt to improve the story in any way, although he might have done so. The young man seemed strangely affected since learning of Ethan Sherman's presence in that wild region.

That day the three miners took out less gold than they had any day previously. Disaster remained with them, stating that he was not yet ready to give up the search for the Lost Gold Cave.

They were all sleeping soundly that night when a heavy knock on the door aroused them. They sat up, grasping their weapons, and Jackwood demanded:

"Who is there?"

For a moment there was no reply, then a deep voice cried:

"Beware! Leave this place at once, or you will meet the fate of those who came before you! *It means death to remain!*"

Then there was a sound of swiftly retreating footsteps.

For several moments the four startled men were silent, then Old Disaster exclaimed:

"Ghost o' ole Goliath! You may riddle my ole carkiss wi' grape an' canister ef thet warn't ther voice o' Flavus Stokes! Can't deceive me—that war the man!"

CHAPTER V.

SHERMAN'S ADVENTURES.

ETHAN SHERMAN was a dream-walker—a real somnambulist. He was not often troubled by walking in his sleep, but after any great excitement he was pretty sure to do so if he slept before his nerves were calmed.

As he sat beside the camp-fire gazing at the face which his fancy pictured within the flames, he gradually and unconsciously became excited. So real did the face of fancy seem that, once or twice, he whispered the name of the dear one for whom he had vainly searched so long.

Sherman was a native of Illinois. Amy St. Orme and Ethan Sherman had been playmates as children, and at the ages of seventeen and nineteen had become pledged lovers.

As soon as he was his own man, Sherman had started out to make a fortune, pledging himself to soon return and marry the girl whom he loved. But while he was away there came along a handsome middle-aged man who fancied the beautiful girl and asked her parents' consent to win her love if possible. Marshal Baylor was apparently wealthy, and Minos St. Orme was poor. As a result the mercenary father attempted to compel the girl to accept the wealthy suitor, who stated that he was a widower and had a daughter nearly as old as Amy herself. But the girl was true to her first love and would have nothing to say to her suitor.

Baylor finally induced the St. Ormes to go West. For some time Amy's father had intercepted and destroyed the correspondence between his daughter and her absent lover, and when Sherman returned to Illinois he was amazed to learn that Amy and her parents had moved away.

From information which he obtained the young man learned that Amy had another suitor in the person of a wealthy man. He did not know that she had repeatedly repulsed Marshal Baylor, but he did know that for many long, weary weeks he had not received a letter from her. All his own appealing epistles had remained unanswered. Not knowing what to think, more than half-inclined to believe her

false, yet hating himself for doubting her an instant, the perplexed lover had suffered intense tortures. But he little knew how much Amy had suffered while troubled by the same doubts and fears.

Sherman succeeded in following the St. Ormes to the place where they joined a wagon-train bound for the Black Hills. Pursuing his investigations he learned that the train had been attacked by Indians in Red Canyon, that treacherous gateway to the Hills, and it was supposed that every person in the train had been slaughtered.

At first Ethan was nearly prostrated by the terrible intelligence, but he finally resolved to discover if in truth his betrothed had been murdered by the red fiends. For several months he had been searching for her, but everything seemed to confirm the belief that Amy had, indeed, perished with the other unfortunates. The young man had joined Old Disaster in the search for the Lost Gold Cave, vaguely hoping that by so doing he might learn something concerning the lost one.

As Ethan sat beside the camp-fire, his thoughts dwelt upon the sad fate which Amy St. Orme had undoubtedly met, and his nerves were somewhat shaken. When he lay down to sleep, the face of his darling seemed still before him, and for a long time he could not close his eyes in slumber. When he finally did fall asleep, he was in the condition to induce one of his somnambulist spells.

Some time in the night he fancied that he felt a touch upon his shoulder, and he seemed to awaken. To his amazement and joy he saw Amy St. Orme bending over him! He came near uttering a cry of delight, when she pressed a finger to her lips and motioned him to arise and follow her. Without a moment's hesitation he complied.

The phantom—if such it was—appeared to glide along without touching the ground, and swiftly Ethan followed. Away from the camp-fire it led him, away through the pines, among which the wind seemed making sad but strangely soothing music.

Sherman did his best to overtake his guide, but it continued to keep in advance. He did not doubt for an instant that it was Amy. It was not, to him, dark beneath the sighing pines. A glorious light seemingly enveloped the form, and the pathway which his feet trod was smooth and even.

He tried to call, but his tongue refused to move. He reached the edge of the pines, but the phantom form fled onward before him and he still pursued. He could not judge the distance he had, in reality, traveled in his sleep, when, suddenly, a chorus of wild yells and a ringing report awakened him.

He stared around in amazement. By the uncertain light of the moon, which was plunging through a mass of ragged clouds, he saw the rocky, scrub-covered hillside on his left, but on the right the heights were hidden by shadows. At that instant he could not imagine where he was nor how he came there.

But he was given little time for speculation.

Again the wild yells came to his ears. He knew the sounds, and a shiver ran over him.

"Indians!" he exclaimed. "Disaster—Junardo—trouble!"

With these exclamations, he turned and hurried toward the spot from whence came the sounds. He had just reached the edge of the pines when a man came dashing toward him and passed within a few feet. As this person left the timber, Ethan saw that it was Flavus Stokes!

"What can have happened?" thought the young man. "I have half a mind to call to him, yet something restrains me. I have never liked that man. I believe I will follow him."

Without pausing to consider why he was doing so, the sleep-walker stole away in the footsteps of the fleeing Stokes. Sherman was not an expert tracker, but, for a time, he succeeded remarkably well in keeping Stokes in view.

Once or twice the fleeing man paused and listened. The sounds of combat had ceased, and a profound silence brooded over the hills, broken only by the distant cry of some night-prowling animal.

Each time he paused Ethan heard Stokes mutter some indistinct words; then he turned and hurried onward again. Feeling decidedly mystified, the young fellow still pursued the man who had accused him of murdering the unfortunate Junardo.

Onward through the night flitted pursued and pursuer. Gradually Stokes climbed a somewhat difficult ascent and Sherman not far behind him. But, when the top was reached, much to

Ethan's surprise, nothing could be seen of the man!

Upon investigating, Ethan discovered that there were several ways for Stokes to have eluded him, providing he had known that he was followed.

While standing there, in his doubt as to the course now to take, he fancied that he heard a sharp whistle some distance away beyond a dense piece of scrub-trees. He at once decided that Stokes had gone that way and hurried forward, again in pursuit.

But to no purpose; during the night he did not see Flavus Stokes again. After a time, however, Sherman discovered that he had lost his bearings and knew not which way to turn to retrace his steps.

He was indeed lost!

A startling situation, indeed! Lost in the heart of a country swarming with hostile Indians!

But Ethan took his misfortune coolly, resolving to find his way back to where the four gold-hunters had camped amid the pines, if such a thing were possible.

Morning came and still the young man had not accomplished his object. Shortly after sunrise he stood on the brink of a deep, narrow ravine. As he paused there for an instant the sound of a sweet voice in song floated upward from out of the gloomy depths! Both amazed and excited, he bent forward and listened. Eagerly his ears drank in the exquisite melody of that voice! The sound of angels' harps could not have been sweeter to his famishing soul.

He knew the song—he knew the voice! and in a wild ecstasy of uncontrollable joy he cried:

"God be praised! It is she—my darling Amy!"

CHAPTER VI.

FACING A TERRIBLE DOOM.

SUDDENLY the singing ceased.

Dropping upon his knees on the very brink of the ravine, Ethan gazed searchingly into the gloomy depths. He could discern nothing but rocks, shrubs and grim shadows.

"She is down there!" he exclaimed, joyously. "I have found her! She is alive!"

He listened, with his heart beating tumultuously, hoping to hear that loved voice again. Swiftly the seconds sped, but no further sound came from below. Slowly the look of joy on his face gave place to one of mingled suspense and disappointment.

Suddenly he shouted:

"Amy! Amy! Amy!"

His only answer was a far-away echo which repeated the name with a despairing, sorrowful accent, it seemed to the almost distracted young man.

"Great heavens!" he groaned. "Was I deceived? Did I not hear her voice? Am I going mad?"

Again he listened. He peered down into the gloom. Far, far down he could see the little stream which ran along the bottom of the ravine, but he perceived no living thing in the dismal depths.

"Amy!" he shouted again. "For God's sake, answer me! It is I, Ethan Sherman!"

No reply, save that of the mocking echoes!

"Was it a spirit?" he whispered. "Did I hear the voice of one who is dead and lost to me forever?"

For fully five minutes he knelt there, peering downward. His heart, which so short a time before had been filled with joy, now felt like a stone in his breast. Finally he sunk down upon the brink of the gorge, feeling utterly crushed and hopeless.

"She is dead!" he moaned. "It is useless for me to longer hope. I remember now that she came to me last night and led me away from the camp. It was her spirit! It was her spirit which I heard singing down there. There is nothing to cause me to wish for a longer life. What is there for me to live for now? Nothing, nothing!"

He started up and again gazed down into the ravine.

"It would mean death to fall from this place," he breathed. "Death! The word has no terrors for me! If I were sure that she is dead! But I am not. She may be living, although how such a thing can be is beyond my power to explain. I have thoroughly scoured these hills and have found no trace of her or her parents. It appears that they surely perished in the Red Canyon butchery."

After a few moments he sprung to his feet, exclaiming:

"I am going down there! Who knows what I

may find? Perhaps it will be some trace of her!"

The very thought caused him to tremble with eagerness and excitement. He hurried along the brink of the ravine looking for a place to descend. He did not go far before he came to a narrow path which led downward along the wall of the gorge.

Sherman paused in surprise.

"This is not a natural path, by any means," declared the young explorer. "If I am not mistaken, nature has been assisted by human hands. This path is used by some one for the purpose of descending into the ravine."

He stood for several minutes, thinking deeply. Finally he muttered:

"It is plain to me that there are human beings in this vicinity. Are they friends or foes? That is a question of interest to me. And if there are human beings near, may not Amy be with them? The very thought makes my heart beat like a heavy hammer. I am going down this path, and may God help me find my darling if she is alive."

With this briefly-muttered prayer, he began the descent. The path was both difficult and dangerous for one who was not used to it, but Ethan Sherman was steady-eyed and sure-footed. He reached the bottom of the gorge in safety and stood beside the little stream meditating on his next move. Finally he turned and moved down the stream.

Carefully Sherman scanned every rock and bush. He examined the ground and found that without doubt human beings had passed along the ravine scores of times. He little knew that less than thirty minutes before he had heard the voice in song from the verge of the ravine, Old Disaster had carefully inspected the very ground which he was now examining. In truth, the old Border Nomad had scarcely passed beyond ear-shot when Sherman reached the ravine.

Down the mountain valley went Sherman until he felt certain that it was useless to proceed further in that direction, then he crossed the stream and returned up the ravine. His search was fruitless in the respect of finding anything that would tell him of the lost Amy.

"There is no one here," he said, aloud, "for I do not believe a human being could have concealed himself from my eyes among these shrubs and boulders. What am I to think? Was that voice I thought I heard a creation of my own imagination? If so my nerves must be in a dreadful condition. Was it a spirit? I cannot tell."

Feeling thoroughly perplexed and baffled, Ethan turned toward the path by which he had descended. Ere he began the ascent he paused and looked upward.

"In one thing I was right," muttered the perplexed young man. "This path is not entirely nature's work; neither do I believe that it is the work of savages. White people have been in this vicinity recently but, there is no one here now."

Slowly and laboriously he ascended the difficult path. He reached the brink of the big gully and paused to look back.

"Good-by," he murmured; "good-by to the fond hope of a short time ago. Amy is dead!"

Then he turned and walked away.

All that day Sherman searched for his friends, but succeeded in finding no trace of them.

Late in the afternoon he was nearly famished of hunger when he espied several deer in a little valley. Getting to the windward, he succeeded in approaching near enough to drop a small doe with a shot from his revolver.

Mentally thanking his lucky stars, he sought a secluded spot with his game, built a fire and was soon feasting on deer-meat. He cooked a supply for future need, and left the remains for wolves and vultures.

That night Ethan slept beneath the stars.

On the following day he resumed his search for his comrades.

Led by a strange fatality, he finally found himself in the vicinity of the ravine in the depths of which he had heard the singing.

He was hastening forward to again peer down into the gorge when he was suddenly confronted by several men, who seemed to arise out of the very ground. Among them Sherman perceived Flavus Stokes!

"Hullo!" growled Stokes, a touch of triumph in his voice. "So it is you, is it?"

Instinctively a feeling that Stokes was his enemy seized Sherman. Something about the man's appearance caused the young man to draw back the hammers of the revolvers which he had swiftly drawn with either hand. Stokes's companions were rough, lawless-appearing men.

"Yes, it is I," retorted Ethan. "What do you want?"

Stokes laughed evilly.

"Want you?" he replied, with a leer, "and I have just the crowd to take you. Throw down your pops, young man."

"Hold!" commanded Sherman, in a ringing voice. "What does this mean?"

Again Stokes laughed.

"What does it mean?" he repeated. "I reckon you know full well what it means. It is useless to try any bluff; you had best surrender."

"What do you mean by this act, Flavus Stokes? Have you turned outlaw and highwayman?"

"You can't play that game, Sherman," was Stokes's reply. "You know well enough what I mean. The blood of your victim cries for vengeance, and this is the crowd that is going to see justice done."

Sherman was amazed.

"Well, now, what are you driving at?" he demanded.

Stokes uttered an exclamation of anger.

"You play the innocent very well, but it won't work, my fine lad. Your neck shall stretch for the murder of Albion Junardo."

"Junardo—murdered?" gasped the astonished young man.

"Yes; and you did the job."

Ethan turned pale, and then his face flushed hotly.

"You lie!" he cried, excitedly. "I know nothing about it, if he really has been killed."

Stokes's face grew black with rage, his eyes flashed, and he clinched his hands in his fierce anger.

"That's right," he hissed. "Talk while you have a chance, my lad. You will soon be where you cannot talk. You did murder Albion Junardo while he slept, and you shall pay the penalty. You fled from the scene of your crime, but I have found you and I will show no mercy."

"I do not doubt your intentions," returned Sherman, regaining his composure in a measure. "I now know well enough that you are a merciless creature with neither heart nor soul, but you will have to take me before you hang me, and I warn you that you'll find it a difficult job to accomplish. What proof have you that I murdered Albion Junardo?"

"Proof enough. Your own knife was found sticking in his breast."

Sherman started. He had missed the knife.

Suddenly a man, who had been creeping up behind the defiant young fellow, sprang upon his back and clasped him around the body, pinning his arms to his sides. In a moment the whole gang rushed forward, and Sherman was quickly disarmed and made a prisoner.

"Ah-a!" sneered Stokes. "Now we have you foul. It does begin to look as if your neck would soon be stretched, doesn't it?"

Sherman's reply was a look of defiance.

A noose was quickly arranged in a lasso, and then he was dragged beneath a tree near by. The lasso was thrown over a limb and the ruffians seized it.

Stokes drew forth his watch.

"I am going to allow you plenty of time to say your prayers," he remarked, with a malicious grin. "In just five minutes' time I shall give the signal: then your body will dangle from that limb."

Still Sherman was defiant. What had he to live for? what cared he for death? Amy was dead, and he would soon be with her. His eyes roved over the faces of the fierce band who held the lasso, then they came back to the now sinister countenance of Flavus Stokes, and without a word he quietly awaited the fatal signal.

CHAPTER VII.

SAVED FROM THE ROPE.

"Yes," repeated Disaster, after a moment's silence, "thet war ther voice o' Flavus Stokes."

"One o' yer late pards?" asked Stone.

"Waal, I never counted him as er pard, though he war one o' ther gang as war s'archin' fer ther Gold Cave. He kinder forced hisself onter us."

"Are you sure that was his voice?" asked Jackwood.

"I'm redly ter bet my ole boots on it," was Disaster's assertion. "He tried ter disguise his voice, but w'en I hear er galoot vociferate er few times I kin usually recognize his warble even ef he tries ter disguise it. Thet war Stokesie, or I'm er antiquated ole truth-twister."

"Then ther man is a traitor," said Cobb.

"Waal, I sh'u'd figger it erbout thet way," assented the old borderman, as he nodded vigorously in the darkness. "Ef he hain't a secon' edishun o' Benedict Arnold then I don't know beans from bullets. Ther blamed white-livered skunk slid out an' lef' me ter fight er hull regiment o' smoky-skins. By ther sword o' Goliath! ef 't adn't been fer thet white-headed ole feller, I reckon I sh'u'd er run erg'in' my las' disaster."

"Waal, w'at does ther sneakin' critter mean by cumin' roun' hyer an' wakin' us with his ghost-like rantin'?" growled Cobb.

"He's up ter sum dirty game, I'll bet er flopped mule," was Stone's opinion.

"Waal, now ye'r shoutin'," Disaster declared. "He didn't cut thet thar caper fer ther fun o' et. P'raps ther scurvy cur has foun' this hyer placer w'at ye'r workin' an' wants ter drive ye away, so't he kin take possession."

"He'll fin' thet erbout ther tuffest ole job he ever tackled," growled Cobb.

And Stone added:

"Waal, I sh'u'd reemark!"

"I think that there was more than one near the cabin when the fellow spoke," said Jackwood. "I listened intently and fancied that I heard at least two men steal away from the cabin."

"I believe ye'r right," said Cobb.

"Oh, he's problikely got frien's in this vicinity," assented Old Disaster. "P'raps ther varmint is ther chief o' er thievin' gang o' sum sort. By ther green-eyed catamounts! it ain't best fer him thet he cums purrin' roun' me. Ef he duz he'll strike ther wu'st disaster as he ever did run ercross. I'm p'ison ter snakes, an' this galoot has proved ter be er reg'ler squarmin' sarpint."

"Pards," said Jackwood, "I am inclined to believe that a band of desperadoes have their retreat in this vicinity."

"W'at makes ye think so?"

"I don't know. To be sure, I have no proof that this is so, but several things connected with the mysteries of this dismal ravine have led me to such a belief. One thing is the strange rumbling noise which we hear so often."

"An' why sh'u'd thet make ye think so?" asked Stone, with interest.

"Those noises sound like heavy blasts beneath the ground. May it not be that parties are working a hidden mine somewhere in this vicinity?"

Jackwood's words were productive of some excitement. The usual drawl had vanished from Jabez Cobb's voice, as he exclaimed:

"Ye'r right, boy! ye'r right! I'm willin' ter gamble on it! Them soun's are heavy blasts under ther groun'."

"It duz seem reasonable," Stone admitted.

"But ther hidden mine must be 'tarnal near, fer I hev almost felt ther groun' shake sumtimes w'en them noises occurred."

"P'raps thet boy o' ther scarlet sash is connected wi' ther gang," Cobb suggested.

"If so, I fancy there must be an entrance to the mine somewhere near the fall," remarked Jackwood.

"I'll bet my ole hat thet thar hain't no entrance anywhere under thet fall," grunted Stone.

"You may be right," Jackwood admitted; "but I know I saw the boy and horse go under the fall, and we all know that there is a small cave there. Where the boy and the white horse went to after passing beneath the fall is something that I cannot say."

For several seconds the men were silent, then Old Disaster said:

"P'raps this gang as you think are in this vicinity hav' foun' ther Gold Cave an' are workin' it fer all it's wu'th."

"Yer may be right," allowed Cobb, slowly; "but I doubt it. I tell you, Pard Disaster, I don't take no stock in thet thar cave. I've heerd considerable 'bout it, but I don't believe thar is sech a place in existence."

"Thet's all right," grunted the old borderman. "You kin believe w'at ye'r mine ter, an' I'll do ther same. I think thar is sech er cave. Ther dyin' Crow Fut didn't lie ter me."

"Ef ye'll trust ther word o' one o' ther cussid critters, ye'll go further nor I will," declared Cobb. "They won't tell ther truth ter er white man ef they know it 'ill pay better than ter lie."

"Sum will," persisted the border ranger. "I hed dun Crow Fut er good turn, an' w'en he collided wi' his last disaster, he did w'at he c'u'd ter return ther compliment."

After a time the four men fell asleep and were not again aroused until dawn.

After breakfast, Disaster announced a determination to go in search of Ethan Sherman.

"Ther lad may be sumw'ares in this vicinity," the old Border Nomad observed. "I am goin' ter find 'im ef I kin."

Jackwood became interested at once.

"I would like to go with you," he said. "Will you permit me?"

"To be course!" exclaimed the old man, heartily. "Ef yer legs are good fer er stiff tramp, I'd be more'n delectated wi' yer company."

"My legs are good for it," declared Jackwood.

Taking his rifle, the young man followed Old Disaster from the cabin. The old nomad led the way up the ravine.

"Thar is a sorter path away up here above ther waterfall by which we kin git out er this heer reveene," the old man observed, as they walked along. "I don't reckon it's more'n hafe er mile erbove the fall. I diskivered it yisterday mornin' while I war nosin' round ther place whar ther mysterious ole gray-head disappeared. It looks like it war made by human critters, an' I kin sweer as how it's been used by them, an' recently at that. I'm goin' ter nose roun' thet place er leetle. No knowin' w'at we may stumble ont'er."

With some difficulty they passed the waterfall and then continued up the ravine. Disaster enjoined the strictest silence on his companion, and like two shadows they stole quietly along.

They finally reached the spot where the path ran down along the precipitous bank of the ravine.

"Thar's ther highway ter up above," said Old Disaster, in a low tone, as he pointed at the path.

Jackwood's eye followed the narrow footway up the steep, and a dubious expression passed over his face. His companion noticed this, and said:

"It does look er leetle jubious, don't it? But it kin be climbed."

After spending a few minutes in the ravine, Old Disaster led the way up the path. Jackwood followed. It was a difficult climb, but they reached the top much easier than Jackwood had anticipated.

"Hyar we are," observed the old borderman, as they paused and looked back for a moment. "Thet's quite er pull, but I've made menny a one a durned sight tuffer."

"It surely is not as bad as it looks," Jackwood admitted.

At this moment they were startled by a quick, light step near at hand, and both whirled swiftly to perceive before them a form which Jackwood instantly recognized.

It was the strange boy of the scarlet sash!

He was afoot and seemed greatly excited. Advancing toward them, he cried:

"Quick, gentlemen, if you would save your friend! He is down that way beyond the pines! They are about to hang him!"

Despite his excitement, the boy's voice was clear and pleasant to the ear. His face, which was marked by eagerness and a touch of terror, was very beautiful.

Old Disaster seemed struck motionless by surprise at the lad's sudden appearance, but Jackwood quickly demanded:

"What do you say? Hang whom?"

"A young man whom they found near this spot. Oh! hasten, sirs, or you will be too late!"

A thought flashed through Jackwood's brain.

"It is Sherman!" he exclaimed, excitedly.

"Come on, old man; we must take a hand in the game!"

He bounded swiftly away in the direction that the boy had pointed, Disaster at his heels. Almost before they were aware of it the two men were in the midst of a band of fierce-looking fellows who had gathered beneath a tree. In an instant Jackwood tore the noose from Sherman's neck, cut his hands loose, then whirled and at Disaster's side faced the astonished desperadoes, a revolver in either hand, held so that the cowering ruffians could look fairly into the muzzles.

"Hoppin' tomcats!" cried the old Hills tramp; "This ar a jubilee, I do deecclare!"

"What does this mean?" cried Jackwood in a ringing voice. "Explain this outrage!"

"Yes; let loose yer crooked, truth-twistin' tongues an' explain this little spectacle," chimed in Disaster.

For a moment Stokes was struck dumb with surprise, but his face quickly turned black with rage, and stepping toward the old ranger, he demanded, furiously:

"Are you here to protect a murderer? Would you stay the hand of justice from punishing a blood-stained criminal?"

The veteran looked surprised.

"Hello, thar, Stokesie!" he exclaimed. "Is thet you? Who appointed you Jedge Lynch?"

"It makes no difference to you. This man is a murderer, and we are going to hang him."

"Waal, I guess not!" remarked the old guide, coolly, as he shook one of his antiquated revolvers in Stokes's face. "Jist stan' back er leetle, yer sneakin' two-faced whelp, or you'll run er-g'in' the wu'st disaster ye ever struck!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A STAIN ON HIS NAME.

STOKES recoiled a step.

"You old fool!" he snarled. "Do you think you can prevent us from hanging that murderer? We are two to your one."

"I don't keer er durn!" was Disaster's calm reply. "T wu'dn't make no difference ef ye war ten ter our one! We're jist ther boyees as enjoy er leetle scrimmage wi' ther odds ag'in' us. Ef ye want er picnic or er circus, all ye've got ter do is jist ter wink yer off eye. We're hyer ter 'commerdate ye."

In truth, the reckless old fellow seemed anxious for a fuss. Stokes hesitated, not knowing what move to make.

Disaster continued:

"Speak right up, Stokesie; don't be 'tall bashful. Ef ye'r itch'n' fer ther fun, don't hesitate erbout givin' ther signal. We'll do our best ter make it interestin' fer ye. Sword o' Goliath! won't we have a time!"

"You are a fool!" snarled the baffled villain, as he glared at the old man.

"So you sed jist er second er so ago," was the reply; "but thet don't make it so, by any means. I'd rather be er fool enny day than er cowardly two-faced imp o' sin—*thet's yerself!*"

"You shall pay dearly for those words!"

And Stokes's face was white with passion.

"Pay for 'em? Now, I'm dead broke an' can't pay. Jist charge 'em, an' I'll settle w'en I feel thet way."

Stokes ground out a malediction.

"Enough of this fool's gab!" he cried. "For the last time I demand that you surrender that fellow into our charge."

"An' fer ther laster time I say fer you an' yer hull measly crowd ter got'er grass! Ef ye want Ethan Sherman, w'y, jist took 'im! But I'm bettin' high on ther leetle game we're playin', an' we hold both hands chock-full o' trumps."

And, to emphasize his words, Disaster again shook his revolvers in Stokes's face.

Jackwood was standing at the old man's side, with a revolver in either hand. Sherman had dropped his weapons in the struggle when he was captured, but he stood in a defiant attitude with both hands clinched.

There were six desperadoes who confronted the three men at bay—just two to one—yet they hesitated in beginning the conflict, knowing full well that one or more of their number were sure to fall before the ready weapons of that dauntless old knight of the Hills and the resolute young man at his side.

"Ye don't seem in er hurry ter open ther jamboree," observed Disaster, mockingly. "Ye hain't seized by er fit, be ye—ther same kind o'er fit as got holt o' ye night afore las', w'en ther smoky-skins kem in ont'er us—er fit o' cowardice! How ye *did* leg it erbout thet time, Stokesie! leavin' meter wallop ther stuff'n' out o' ther red rinos. I tell ye, Stokes, ole boyee, ef I'm er fool, surely you are er double-dyed coward frum Craven Crick."

"Curse you!" snarled the defied villain. "How did you escape?"

"Licked ther hull durned crowd," grinned the old man. "I'm wuss nor hafe er dozen cstermounts w'en it cums ter ginawin' fightin'. Jist now I feel able to wallop ther hull gang. Say, Jackwood, my boyee, jis' stan' back an' let me hev all ther fun, will ye?"

Disaster was playing a big game of bluff. While he talked his thoughts were busy, and he was perplexed to know how they were to get Sherman out of the scrape. It was apparent that the desperadoes would not surrender their claim on the young man without a struggle, and, although the old Border Nomad appeared very confident of the result, secretly he dreaded a conflict. Disaster was wise enough to know that the chances were against himself and friends. If they were not all slain in the conflict, perhaps one of them would be, and that would be a severe blow.

"Old man," said Stokes, firmly, "I will give you just one minute to decide. If you do

not give up the murderer, you know what will follow. I am determined to stretch Ethan Sherman's neck for his crime if I have to wade through blood to do it."

"Whew!" cried the old borderman. "Yer er reckless critter, now hain't ye? Waal, ye needn't bother ter waste er minute. I'll tell ye now thet if ye get Ethan Sherman ye'll hev ter take him. So walk in an' let ther fun begin."

At this point Sherman spoke up:

"Don't endanger your own life on my account, Disaster. If these men will give me half a show I will prove that I am innocent of the crime with which I am charged."

Disaster laughed scornfully.

"Thet wu'dn't make no difference, young man. They're boun' ter hang ye anyway, ef they kin. Ef they knew ye war innercent they wu'd hang ye jist ther same. That's thet style. It's not tuer murder they're doin' this fer; I reckon it's er piece o' pure out-an'-out cussedness, an' Stokes is ther chief Satan ov these cut-throats."

"You are right, Disaster," added Jackwood. "While pretending to avenge murder, they are simply committing another. These fellows are evidently ruffians of the worst type."

Stokes said not a word, but, watch in hand, counted the seconds as they sped by. Soon he closed the watch with a snap, and announced:

"Time's up!"

Hardly had he uttered the words when the sound of a rifle-shot not far away came to their ears, followed by a series of whoops, which plainly were from the throats of red-skins.

Disaster saw his opportunity and instantly uttered an ear-splitting yell.

"Ther red varmints are upon us!" he cried. "Scoot, every one o' ye! scoot fer yer lives! Don't waste er second ef ye don't want yer skulps ter hang in Sioux wigwams! Git! buzzards an' eagles!"

The old man's apparent excitement was contagious. The men wheeled swiftly in alarm and ran as fast as their legs would carry them. But, ere he fled, Stokes made one last desperate effort to take young Sherman's life. Snatching out a revolver, he took a quick aim at the young man's breast, but, before he could fire, a kick from Disaster's foot sent the weapon flying from his hand.

Uttering a fierce curse, the defeated villain followed the flying men.

"Come, lads," called out Old Disaster, briskly. "Foller me an' we'll hit kiver afore ther red varmints sight us."

He swiftly glided away, Jackwood and Sherman at his heels. The old Border Nomad was an experienced Indian strategist and at once made for the nearest cover. Within three minutes he was stealing his way through a dense mass of tall bushes like a weasel.

"Ther blamed red rinos run er-g'in' ther boy o' ther scarlet sash," Disaster observed as they hurried along. "Ef he only held ther 'tention long ernuff we'll hev no tr'ubble wi' 'em. As fer follerin' er trail ef they try thet they'll find several ter foller, an' I reckon they'll imagine as how they've struck er deafkilty."

For thirty minutes they stole along, and then the old guide halted in a little glade.

"Waal, youngsters," he observed, "them red varlets putt in their yawp at jist ther right time. They helped us out o'er blamed deafkilty, bless their condemned dirty hides!"

Sherman and Jackwood said not a word. They stood facing each other, and the old man saw by the strange looks on their faces that something serious was to follow.

Sherman was the first to speak.

"And so it is you, Frank St. Orme?"

Jackwood bowed.

"I see you know me," he said, holding out his hand. "Will you shake?"

Sherman hesitated.

"I cannot take the hand of a criminal," he finally said.

Jackwood's face became very red, and he bowed, coldly.

"As you please," and his voice sounded husky. "I see you still believe me guilty."

"How can I think otherwise? The circumstantial evidence was very strong, and the confession of the captured robber served to convince every one."

"No, not every one!" cried Jackwood. "Amy never believed that I was guilty."

"True, she did not. But, others did. Even your father questioned your innocence, and your mother would only wring her hands and weep. Not once did she say that she believed you innocent."

"For all of that, I swear to you, Ethan Sherman, I had no hand in the Brocton bank-rob-

bery. I know I was wild, and that I nearly broke my parents' hearts by my thoughtless deeds. I know that the man who led my feet along the downward path, the gambler, Doyce Bradon, was the one robber captured. I know that he implicated me; but as there is a God in Heaven, I swear I am innocent!"

"Would to Heaven you could prove that!" said Sherman, earnestly.

"But I cannot. I was forced to flee like a criminal, and like a hunted man I have lived ever since. But, Ethan, I have come to you to learn something of my parents and Amy."

"Did you not know of their coming West?"

"No! Did they do so? Where are they?"

Then Sherman told the story of the St. Ormes' journey Westward and of their probable fate in the Red Canyon massacre. Jackwood was shocked and horrified beyond measure.

"Great heavens!" he groaned. "This cannot be! Are you sure that they were murdered by the red fiends?"

Sherman told of his search for Amy, not omitting his peculiar adventure near the path which led down into Dismal Gorge. Jackwood was badly shaken by the terrible news.

"If Amy is living I will find her!" declared the brother, as he raised one hand above his head. "I swear it! She never believed me guilty!"

After a time Disaster started onward again, Sherman close behind and Jackwood following Sherman. For half an hour they pushed forward and finally found themselves again gazing down into Dismal Gorge. Then Sherman turned to speak to Jackwood, only to discover that he was not with them!

CHAPTER IX.

HOT WORDS AND A BLOW.

SHERMAN uttered an exclamation of surprise, and, perceiving Jackwood was gone, Disaster said:

"Sorrer o' Sodom! Whar is ther boyee?"

"Gone," replied Sherman. "He has left us."

"An' w'at fer did he do thet?" grunted the old man, in disgust.

Sherman shook his head.

"I don't know. Perhaps—perhaps I did wrong. It may be that he would not come with me."

Ethan hesitated and seemed perplexed about something, when Disaster laid one hand heavily on his friend's shoulder.

"Boyee," said the old borderman, impressively, "I hev took er likin' ter Justin Jackwood, as he calls hisself. Thet lad has an hones' face."

"I know—I know; he appears to be a fine fellow. He always appeared that way. Yet there is a stain on his name."

"Justin Jackwood hain't no robber. I don't keer er hooter who ses so, I don't believe it. I never saw ther boyee afore yisterday, yet I'm reddy ter stan' by him through thick an' thin."

The old man's words seemed to touch Sherman to the quick, for he shrunk back, a pained expression on his face.

"And yet I am ready to believe him guilty," he muttered, slowly. "He may not be, but if you only knew all of his wild life. His boon companion was the gambler, Doyce Bradon, who is now in prison for being one of the Brockton Bank robbers. Bradon swore that this person whom you call Jackwood was his accomplice."

"I don't keer," was Old Disaster's obstinate response; "I don't believe it. Bradon may hev led Jackwood inter gamblin', but I don't believe he ever got him inter any bank-breakin' diviltry. Ther gambler most likely tole thet yarn hopin' ter git er light sentence."

"I tell ye, Jackwood's built outer ther right kind o' stuff. He's got solid sand—thet's sure. He war ther fu'st one ter reach ye as you stood wi' ther rope roun' yer neck er short time ergo, an' wi' his own han's he flung off ther noose as w'u'd 'a' choked ther life outer yer boddy in er blessed short time ef we hadn't took er han' in ther leetle game."

Again Old Disaster's words seemed to cut Sherman deeply. The pained look on the young man's face deepened, and his eyes were fixed upon the ground.

"I may have done wrong," he faltered. "I fear I did. He is her brother—Amy's brother."

"What did ye call 'im—his name?"

"Never mind his name. He calls himself Jackwood; we will call him that for the present."

Old Disaster grunted shortly.

"I ought to have taken his hand when he offered it," Sherman continued. "I was a little hard. I fear that I forgot that in a measure I was indebted to him for my life. More than that, at that time and now, there is a more terrible charge against me than that of robbery; but I am innocent."

"Kin ye prove yer innercence?"

"I hope to."

"Yet ther sarcumstances look mightier kinder squarmish. Wi' my own eyes I saw yer knife buried ter ther hilt in Janardo's breast."

"But you do not believe me guilty?" gasped Sherman, "surely you do not!"

"No, I don't," was the decided reply; "an' yit nine juries out o' ten would convict ye on thet evidence."

"I fear you are right."

"Ther evidence are ekil ter thet erg'in' Jackwood."

"True, true! Did he know of this?"

"He knows as much as I do. I tole him ther hull story."

"And he did not mention it—did not even hint at it when I spoke of the stain on his name."

The old man's eyes twinkled.

"I tell ye, boyee, Jackwood are white."

"I believe you. I have treated him shamefully. I will ask his pardon when we meet again."

Old Disaster nodded vigorously with a pleased expression on his face, but said not a word.

"The manner in which I treated him may have had something to do with his sudden disappearance," added Sherman. "Hadn't we better turn back and see if we cannot find him?"

"No, I reckon not. Jackwood left us on his own accord an' we problikely c'u'dn't find 'im ef we tried. I hev an ijec as how he has determined ter hunt up ther gal as ye war speakin' ov—his sister. He may strike ther cabing down ther reveen afore nightfall."

Then the old man briefly told Sherman of Jackwood's companions and the placer they were working in Dismal Gorge.

A few minutes later they descended by a most difficult and dangerous route into the narrow ravine and turned their faces toward the miners' cabin. In due time they reached their destination and found Cobb and Stone hard at work.

Old Disaster introduced Ethan Sherman in his peculiar style, then he told of Jackwood's resolve to find his sister, and of the young man's sudden disappearance. The old borderman was careful to say nothing of what had passed between Jackwood and Sherman, for which the latter was very thankful.

The day passed, and at nightfall Jackwood had not put in an appearance. Old Disaster was uneasy and uncommunicative, but he seemed worried at the young man's failure to appear. Almost the last thing he did ere entering the cabin at dark was to strain his eyes to peer through the gloom toward the waterfall.

Jackwood's partners were also worried about the young fellow, whom they both liked in their peculiar way.

That evening the four men gathered before an open fire within the cabin, and all sat staring moodily into the flames, while Stone, Cobb and Old Disaster filled the room with tobacco-smoke.

They had not fastened the cabin-door, and were startled when it was suddenly hurled open and a man strode into the room.

The four men leaped to their feet and turned on the intruder.

It was Flavus Stokes!

Behind him, just without the doorway, they perceived several dark forms.

For a moment Stokes stood before the four men, blinking rapidly, as if partially blinded by the firelight. Finally his eyes rested on Ethan Sherman's tall form, and he declared, as he pointed straight at the young man:

"That's ther chap I want, and I have come with the crowd to take him!"

"Sword o' old Goliath!" cried Old Disaster.

"Ef it hain't Stokesie erg'in'!"

"Yes," growled the villain, in a blustering manner, "I have come for that murderer, and I am going to take him."

"Now, don't be too sart'in erbout thet," said the old Border Nomad, as he endeavored to count the dark forms beyond the doorway. "You may find it real invigeratin' exercise ter do thet same leetle job. I hev warned ye, Stokesie, not ter fool roun' me unless ye'r' anx'us ter run erg'in' er full-sized, double-actin' disaster."

"There, let up on that kind of yawp!" snarled Stokes. "I've heard enough of your chin."

Old Disaster's eyes flashed.

"Ef you think it's all chin, jist let yerself loose an' wade inter ther ole man. Sorrer o' Sodom! but w'u'dn't we hev er racket! Waal, I sh'u'd surclaim!"

But Stokes seemed in no hurry to test the old man's physical powers. Instead, he took a step toward Ethan Sherman, but, with nervous haste, Eben Stone snatched out a revolver and thrust it into the desperado's very face.

"Hole on! hole on!" spluttered the California gold-hunter. "Let's reeson er little erbout this hyer."

Stokes stopped promptly enough, but he drew back one hand as if to strike the wrinkled old man who blocked his path.

Cobb laid his hand on Stokes's arm.

"Pard," he drawled, slowly, "ye hadn't better do et. Thet thar durned little runt kin shoot quicker'n ye kin strike ter save yer soul."

"Git back!" cried Stone, excitedly shaking the revolver in the intruder's face; "git back, I say!"

Stokes was obliged to retreat several steps.

Sherman came forward.

"I thank you, friends," the young man said, "but I cannot ask you to fight my battle. If this man wants anything of me, let him make his business known."

"I want you," growled the angry villain, "and I am going to take you, too."

"For the purpose of hanging me, as you tried to do to-day, I suppose."

"Well, that's about the size of it."

"Do you expect that I will surrender, knowing full well that I shall be murdered if I do so?"

"If you don't surrender, we will take you."

"Then you may as well walk in and take me. I shall not surrender."

"Thet's ther tork, boyee!" piped Old Disaster. "Let 'em walk in an' run erg'in' er cyclone o' devastation. We kin lick ther blamed pimps, an' I'll bet mer wealth on it."

"I have ten men here at the door," announced Stokes.

"Er reg'ler gang o' lan' pirates, by ther sword o' Goliath!" snorted the old borderman. "I knowed it!"

"We are peaceable, law-abiding people, but we don't allow murderers to go free while their victim molders and his blood cries for vengeance."

"Ye'r' puttin' yerselves ter a pile o' tr'ubble," observed Old Disaster.

"Simply because I have sworn that this red-handed assassin shall not escape."

"I am no assassin," asserted Sherman.

"You lie!" snarled Stokes. "You—"

But he got no further. Sherman leaped forward, his fist shot out from the shoulder and struck Flavus Stokes fairly between the eyes, the *thwack* of the blow being heard by those within and without the cabin. The stroke was a terrific one. Stokes was hurled backward through the open doorway and landed in the midst of his followers outside.

Ere a hand could be raised to prevent, Old Disaster slammed the door shut and propped it with a heavy wooden bar. The next instant the desperadoes hurled themselves against the door, but it withstood the attack.

"Git out er hyer, ye dirty varmint!" yelled the old borderman. "Ef ye linger in this vicinity ye'r' pritty apt ter run erg'in' er red-hot disaster."

There was no reply.

Old Disaster turned toward Sherman.

"Boyee," he said, his face wreathed by a comical grin, "thet war jist erbout ther dingdest pritty clip as I ever did see."

For some time all was silent outside the cabin. Once or twice those within caught a faint murmur of voices.

"Wonder what they're up ter?" said Cobb.

"Dunno," was Stone's reply; "p'raps they're plottin' sum devltry."

"Waal, now you jist bet yer boots thet's ther size o' it," was Old Disaster's remark. "We shall heer frum them erg'in'."

His words proved true. Listening closely, they all plainly heard the sound of softly-moving feet near the rear end of the cabin.

"Wonder wa't they're doin' roun' there," said Cobb, who seemed uneasy.

Stone did not reply, and Old Disaster shook his head. Sherman stole across the floor and listened at the back of the cabin. A crackling sound, low and soft, came to his ears. Like a flash he turned toward his companions, crying:

"They have fired the cabin!"

CHAPTER X.

THE CAVERN NYMPH.

THE strange white-bearded man who had so suddenly disappeared almost before Old Disaster's very eyes, had entered an underground passage by means of a secret door, set within what appeared to be a solid wall of ledge-like rock. There was a thick mass of bushes before the door, therefore the night-shadower had not discovered in what manner he was eluded.

Carefully closing the door behind him, the strange man stooped and laid the body of Junardo at his feet. A moment later he found and lighted something which resembled a candle.

Stooping, he lifted Junardo on his right arm with remarkable ease. Bearing the light in his left hand, he passed along a narrow passage. Not once did he pause, although the passage was long, winding and in places strewn with stones.

Finally he entered a small round cavern-chamber. As he did so there was a little cry of delight, and a small, graceful form came forward.

The old man saw before him a girl, and a very beautiful one, at that. Her face was pale—a pallor which plainly told of a lack of free-air exercise; but a slight tinge of color had come into it as she saw the white-bearded man. She was dressed neatly, in direct contrast to the old man, who wore half-civilized garments.

"Ah, father, back again!" she cried in a pleasant tone.

Then noticing the form he carried, she added: "Mercy! what have you there?"

"A dead man, child!" replied the strange man in a deep voice. "I have brought him here to experiment on. By the marks on his throat, I see he was strangled. His body has not become stiff, and therefore *he shall live again!*"

The girl did not speak for a moment, but she regarded the man whom she called father, in a peculiar manner. There was a look of mingled pity and fear on her sweet, sad face.

A fire was burning within a sort of natural fireplace at one side of the cavern. Above it was a large hole that led upward through the rock and earth. The smoke from the fire ascended this natural chimney and escaped far above by two-scores of tiny holes. From a short distance the smoke would not be noticed.

Not far from the fireplace was a couch of furs. Upon this the strange man placed his ghastly burden, and even as he did so a faint groan came from the supposed dead man's lips.

Life was not yet extinct!

"He is not dead!" muttered the white-bearded man, a look of genuine disappointment appearing upon his face. "Again I shall be unable to make the great experiment. Once more the privilege is snatched from my fingers. Fate is against me."

"Poor father! poor father!" whispered the girl; but her words were so low that he did not hear them.

She advanced and laid one hand upon his shoulder.

"Father, if the man is not dead it is our duty to restore him and do what we can to save his life."

The old man did not at once reply. His lips moved and he repeated words which seemed meaningless.

The girl shrunk back, the look of fear again showing upon her face.

"He was strangled," muttered the man, after a time. "The marks were on his throat when I first saw him."

"He was stabbed!" cried the girl. "Look, father! there is the knife!"

She pointed toward the hilt, which seemed to indicate that the blade was buried in Junardo's left breast.

"Am I blind?" exclaimed the man, as he gazed at the knife-haft, which he seemed to see for the first time. "I saw the marks on his throat, but in my haste I did not see this knife."

He examined the position of the knife closely and then said:

"It would seem that such a stroke must bring almost instant death, yet this man lives. It must be that the blade entered his breast in a slanting manner. Perhaps it struck a rib and was turned aside. It is too far to the left to strike his heart, yet such a stroke, were the knife driven straight home, would produce death."

He took hold of the hilt of the knife and his touch caused the wounded man to groan. Evidently Junardo was fast recovering consciousness.

"The thick folds of this blanket and his clothes beneath have done much to protect him,"

continued the white-bearded man. "He has bled considerably."

"Child, get bandages, for I shall withdraw this knife and must dress the wound."

The girl flew to obey, and while she was gone her father carefully removed the knife. As he thought, the blow had been a glancing one, the blade being turned by striking a rib. The wound, although serious, was not necessarily fatal were the patient cared for by skilled hands. But Junardo had been choked into unconsciousness and had lost considerable blood. The cave-dweller knew that it was very doubtful if he could be saved.

When the girl returned with the bandages, she found that her father had cut away the clothing and disclosed the wound. It was bleeding afresh, but with his daughter's aid the hermit soon dressed the cut in a really skillful manner.

When they had finished they discovered that their patient had opened his eyes and was staring at the darkness which served as a ceiling.

"Ah," said the white-bearded man, "so you have recovered? How do you feel?"

Junardo did not reply. He turned his eyes upon them, but in their depths was a vacant look.

"He is dazed," observed the girl. "Give him some liquor, father. A taste may do him much good."

"Bring it, child."

Swiftly she complied.

The hermit held the bottle to Junardo's lips and allowed a few drops to pass into his mouth. The unfortunate man had been choked into unconsciousness, and then struck by the knife. It was almost a miracle that neither the choking or the blow from the knife had proved fatal. The liquor did not seem to drive the vacant look from the sufferer's eyes.

"He is deranged," observed the hermit.

Then he picked up the bloody knife that he had removed from Junardo's breast. He held it so that the light fell upon the letters "E. D. S." cut upon the handle. The girl started as she saw them.

"His initials!" she whispered, hoarsely.

The man heard her words.

"Yes, *his* initials. I know whom you mean, but there may be a hundred men with the same initials. There is little chance that this is Ethan Sherman's knife. I hope not, for if it were, it would appear that he was an attempted murderer."

The girl said nothing more, but moved slowly from the couch. Her hands were tightly clinched, and her bosom rose and fell with emotion.

"If it should be!" she murmured. "Perhaps he is among these Hills searching for me. Shall we ever meet again?"

"If father would only go from here. But he will not. He swears he will have revenge on Marshal Baylor. Poor father! He is so wild at times, and I fear him so! To-night, when he left the cave, he was having one of his terrible spells. It is useless for me to ask him where he found this wounded man, for he probably does not remember. He never remembers after one of the spells."

"He has an idea that he can restore life to a dead person. He has been a great student and has experimented all his life with chemicals. Were it not for his knowledge of strange explosives, he would have been slain by savages many times. But he always succeeds in frightening them away."

"If Ethan Sherman is alive and true to me, God grant that he may find me. No longer does father desire that I shall marry a wealthy man. The treachery of Marshal Baylor cured him of that. What a fiend that man is! I do not understand why father does not wreak vengeance upon him, as he has had hundreds of chances to do. But he says the time has not yet arrived."

During the remainder of the night the hermit watched by the couch upon which Albion Junardo lay. Junardo slept some, but did not speak once for hours.

The girl spent as much time as she dared in the open air, never going far from the secret entrance to the underground passage. At an early hour the following day she was in the ravine, and it was her voice that Ethan Sherman heard as he stood on the brink far above her.

She heard his wild cry and recognized her own name; then, terrified and excited, she hastened into the passage and closed the entrance.

With trembling limbs she hurried along the winding passage until she reached the cavern chamber.

"Father," she cried, pantingly, "I heard a voice while I was in the ravine. Three times it called my name, and it sounded like Ethan's voice. Something tells me that he is near."

"Then," said the old man, gravely, "it was his knife that we found in the breast of that man lying there!"

CHAPTER XI.

RESCUED FROM RED HANDS.

JARIUS JACKWOOD, as we shall continue to call the young miner, had halted and allowed Old Disaster and Ethan Sherman to go on without him. As Jackwood was behind his companions, this act was not noticed, and he was not missed until they reached the ravine.

Jackwood had resolved to explore the ravine in the vicinity of the spot where Sherman had heard the voice in song. The young man was deeply affected by the news of his parents' and sister's supposed death. Sherman's coolness had also touched a tender spot in his sensitive nature.

When Disaster and Sherman had disappeared, he exclaimed:

"Dead—murdered by the reds! A terrible fate! I cannot believe that dear Amy is dead—that I shall never see her again. Even when my parents doubted, she still believed me innocent. A purer, truer girl never breathed! I was wild and reckless, yet her tender heart always clung to me, and her pure kiss on my liquor-stained lips often brought a blush of shame to my cheek."

"I wonder now that, reckless as I then was, Doyce Bradon did not attempt to induce me to have a hand in that Brocton robbery. What a miserable creature that man is! He was ready to swear away my liberty that he might obtain a shorter sentence. He led my feet along the road to ruin, and he has placed a black stain upon my name, which may never be removed. How I hate him!"

Jackwood clinched his hands, and his whole form quivered with the intensity of his emotion.

After a few moments he turned and made his way back along the course that he had traversed with Sherman and Old Disaster. Not knowing what dangers he might encounter, he stole cautiously along, keeping under cover as much as possible, and holding his rifle ready for use.

"I would give much to again meet that mysterious boy of the scarlet sash," he muttered. "The sweet face of that handsome lad has left an impression on mind that is not easily erased. I feel a strange interest in him."

After a time Jackwood reached a spot where he could see the tree beneath which Ethan Sherman had stood with a rope around his neck. There appeared to be no one in the vicinity.

"I wonder who those ruffians were?" soliloquized Jackwood. "They seemed to be a regular band of desperadoes. If we had not appeared just as we did they would have hanged Sherman."

After he had made sure that there was no one but himself near the spot, he passed the tree and continued toward the path which led down into the ravine. He reached the path just as Old Disaster and Sherman were passing down the gorge below. Jackwood was careful to keep back so that they would not see him should they glance upward, and finally they disappeared down the ravine.

"Now," said Jackwood, "I am going down and explore this place. I do not care to return to the cabin while Ethan Sherman is there. He believes me guilty of robbery, and forgets that he is shadowed by a greater crime."

Down into the gorge he made his way and began to examine the ground foot by foot, inch by inch. For nearly an hour he was thus occupied, when suddenly a cry of joy burst from his lips.

Close to the edge of the little stream, plainly outlined in the soft earth, he perceived the imprint of a tiny, moccasined foot, evidently a woman's.

"She lives!" he exclaimed, joyously. "I feel sure that she lives and has been here! Sherman heard her voice!"

Strangely enough, Jackwood did not appear to doubt but that the imprint was made by the foot of his lost sister. For an hour he eagerly searched for some further trace, and although he passed and repassed the bushes before the secret entrance to the underground passage, he found nothing to reward him for his toil.

After a time he found a snug spot in the midst of a small but thick mass of bushes and sat down to watch and wait. He felt sure that

if he remained there long enough he would see something which would lead him to the one he sought.

The silence was profound and Jackwood finally fell asleep and dreamed. He fancied that a small white cloud gradually settled toward the spot where he reclined with his back against a soft, yielding mass of thick bushes. A short time it hovered directly over him, and then it slowly parted and in the midst of it he saw a face. At first he thought it was the face of his sister, but gradually it changed until it appeared to be that of the boy who wore the scarlet sash. But, while Jackwood was gazing at the strange boy, another change took place. The boy became a girl. Her face was wondrously pretty, and her red lips parted in a smile as she gazed toward the young man. Slowly she extended one hand and beckoned to him. He fain would have gone to her, but it seemed that he could not stir. A look of sorrow came over the face of the fair vision, and gradually she faded from his view.

Then Jackwood seemed to hear a sweet voice singing. It appeared to be very far away. He could not distinguish the words, but the air was familiar. He lay quite still, feeling enchanted by the music from the lips of the unknown singer of his dream. It seemed that he lay thus for hours, and, when he awoke, the sound of the song was still within his ears.

He started up, exclaiming:

"I believe that, like Ethan Sherman, I have heard Amy singing! I heard her voice while I slept. I did not recognize the song, but I am sure that it was she."

With this belief in his mind, the young man again explored the ravine in the immediate vicinity.

He found nothing.

"For the time I am ed," he said, aloud, as he paused at the foot of the path which led up out of the ravine. "But I shall haunt this place until I discover whether my hopes are vain or not."

"Just now I am hungry, and must have something to eat. I will not go to the cabin, for I have no desire to meet Ethan Sherman again to-day. I will endeavor to find and shoot game of some kind."

With this object in view, he ascended the path and left the ravine.

Leaving Dismal Gorge behind, Jackwood struck out at random, hoping to soon come across game that he could shoot and cook. An hour later found him far away from the ravine, but still tramping on, having been unsuccessful in his hunt.

He was passing along a wooded defile, when the sharp clatter of a horse's hoofs came to his ears. An instant he listened and discovered that the horse was approaching. With an agile spring, Jackwood reached cover and crouched in concealment, peering forth to get a view of the galloping animal.

A moment later a riderless white horse dashed into view and swept by like the wind.

An exclamation burst from Jackwood's lips. He recognized the horse as the one ridden by the boy of the scarlet sash.

A faint cry of mingled terror and distress floated down the defile.

"The boy is in trouble!" cried Jackwood, softly, and he broke into a run, heading toward the spot from whence came the sound.

In a few moments he came upon an unequal struggle. The strange lad who wore the scarlet sash was struggling in the hands of two brawny red-skins.

Jackwood did not hesitate a moment, and before the Indians were aware of it he was upon them.

He dashed the butt of his rifle into the face of one of the startled Sioux warriors, knocking him senseless. The other released the boy and turned on Jackwood, a knife gleaming in his right hand.

"Come on, you red devil!" cried the young miner.

The Indian needed no invitation. He leaped toward Jackwood, the knife flashing above his head.

Jackwood struck at his red foe with the heavy rifle, but the warrior dodged the blow, and Jackwood was forced to retreat to avoid the wicked knife.

Then Jackwood jerked out a revolver and fired twice, the second time with the muzzle not two feet from the breast of his foe.

With a wild cry, the savage fell dead.

"That settles you," said the victor, his face looking white and bloodless. "I hope that you were one of the fiends who participated in the Red Canyon massacre."

He felt a light hand on his arm and turned to see the boy at his side.

The lad's face beamed with joy and gratitude, and he said:

"Sir, I have to thank you for rescuing me from the hands of these red marauders. They were making me their captive when you so opportunely appeared."

The color stole back to Jackwood's face, and swiftly he caught the hand which lay upon his arm.

"Don't mention it!" he cried. "I saw your horse go by and heard your cry of distress. It was fortunate that I happened to be near."

"You are right, sir," replied the lad, as his eyes fell before the young man's earnest gaze, and he swiftly withdrew his hand, a blush suffusing his cheeks. "I am very much in your debt."

"Not much," laughed Jackwood. "You warned me to-day of the danger of a friend, and with my companion's aid his life was saved. But for you he might have hanged."

"I am glad that you saved him," said the boy.

"I have desired very much to meet you," continued Jackwood; "now my desire is gratified. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Jarius Jackwood. Will you tell me yours?"

The boy hesitated a moment, then replied:

"The men call me Little Scarlet Sash."

"The men!" exclaimed Jackwood. "What men?"

The boy's face turned very red, and he stammered as he answered:

"Friends—of course I have friends."

"To be sure," assented the young miner. "Excuse my inquisitiveness. I had no right to ask that question."

The boy shot him a grateful glance.

"Now, we had better attempt to recover your horse," said Jackwood. "We will leave these red demons where they lay. One will have a sore head when he wakes up; the other has already crossed over to the happy hunting-grounds."

They turned their faces down the defile, whither the frightened horse had gone, and as they walked along they conversed pleasantly, but with some restraint on the boy's part. Indeed, the lad seemed a trifle ill at ease.

Jackwood longed to fathom the mystery which hung around the lad, yet forbore asking too many questions. For some reason the young miner had become intensely interested in the boy.

After a long tramp they reached the mouth of the defile, but still the white horse was not visible.

"Where can he have gone?" asked the boy, anxiously.

"We must find him soon," said Jackwood.

Again they started forward, but had not gone far before Jackwood espied the horse feeding quietly on a grassy spot.

"There he is," said the young miner.

There was no response.

He turned to look for the boy, and found that he was alone.

Scarlet Sash had vanished!

CHAPTER XII.

OLD DISASTER'S DOOM.

SHERMAN's startling declaration brought a cry of consternation from the lips of the three men who heard it.

The cabin was on fire!

The four men looked into each other's faces in a helpless, inquiring manner. They were rewarded by seeing a look of mingled rage and fear on every countenance.

"Their dirty varlets!" grieved Old Disaster. "They mean to burn us out and shoot us down as we leave their caving. Durn their rotten hides!"

"I believe ye'r' right," admitted Eben Stone, as he took down his rifle from where it hung against the wall. "I'd like to get er dig at 'em wi' leetle ole Spotter hyer. I'd make one o' their dirty pimps sick ter their stummick, an' don't ye fergit that!"

"Pard," turning to Cobb, "we has got to get out w'at dust we've got an' divvy. This ole ranch is goin' down. We may not git er way wi' an eunce er yellow, but there hain't northin' like tryin'. As fer Jackwood's sheer, p'raps we'd better putt it inter Ole Disaster's han's. I reckon that ole galoot will stan' ez good er show o' gittin' away as any o' us, an' I'll swear by his honesty."

While Stone and Cobb were dividing the gold, Old Disaster and Sherman were consulting on the best plan to follow.

"We shall be forced out right in their faces o'

ther rotten skunks," said Old Disaster. "They kin lay under kiver an' pick us off by their light o' ther fire. Condemn their black hearts!"

"We are in a tight box," admitted Sherman, gloomily, "and I cannot forget that I brought this trouble upon you all. If I had surrendered—"

"Ye'd 'a' bin murdered," cut in the old borderman. "Thet's sure ernuff."

"It would have been better for one to have died than for all. Yet the cowardly ruffians may not turn their rifles upon any one but me. You all may escape, while I may be riddled with bullets."

Sherman's words set Old Disaster to thinking. The old man soon decided that Ethan was right. They might all escape unharmed except the youngest, and he might be the target for half a score of rifles.

The crackling of the flames could now be plainly heard, and it was apparent that the fire was making rapid headway. Evidently the desperadoes had used oil to assist them in their incendiary work.

Old Disaster opened the trap-like window and gazed out. The light from the flames was beginning to be visible, and the darkness was filled with fantastic forms. The old man peered sharply into the gloom, but could see nothing of their enemies.

"I don't see northin' o' ther dirty critters," declared the old borderman, as he nervously fingered the long rifle which he had picked up; "an' 'tain't best fer 'em that I do. I reckon I'd be guilty o' causin' er funeral ef I did; I w'u'd, by ther sword o' Goliath!"

Sherman said nothing, but gazed at the floor in deep thought.

Finally, Old Disaster closed the window.

By this time Stone and Cobb had divided the gold, and Jackwood's share, which had been placed in two small leather bags, was given to the old ranger and scout. He easily stowed them in two of his capacious pockets somewhere within his buckskin jacket.

"What hev ye decided on?" asked Stone.

Old Disaster shook his head.

"Nothin' fully. Ther silence o' them measly lan'-pirates kinder kerflummegates me. I don't know jist w'at ter think o' it. We hain't heard er soun' frum 'em since they sot ther fire."

"Et can't be thet they hev gone away."

"No; but I reckon they're tryin' ter make us think they hev. Ye know they kem hyer arter our frien' Sherman. Waal, they didn't git him. Naow, they are most probbly layin' low out theer in ther dark waitin' fur us ter cum out, w'en they kin drap Sherman wi' ten or er dozen lead pills."

"Thet's it!" exclaimed both Stone and Cobb, in a breath.

"Naow," continued the old borderman, speaking crisply and to the point, "ef Sherman gits out o' hyer erlive, he's got to do so mighty suddint-like. Them critters will expect us ter stay in till ther fire drives us out. Then there will be plenty o' light ter see where ter putt their lead. Ef we slide now we'll probbly catch 'em by surprise an' may git er way."

"We are reddy," said Jabez Cobb.

"All right. Sherman is ter go fu'st. Thet may seem like shovin' 'im out fur er target, but it's jist ther thing ter do. Ther fire is at ther back eend o' ther caving, an' as it has not got above ther ruff yet, ther ole hulk gives er long shadder. Keep ter ther shadder, boyee, an' scoot fer yer life. You bein' ther fu'st one ter go, an' thet afore any o' us is 'spected ter leave, ther critters will be taken by s'prise an' ye may reach kiver afore they kin salt ye."

They all saw that the old borderman's plan was the best, and Sherman signaled his willingness to go. Eben Stone thrust a revolver into the young man's right hand, and Old Disaster removed the wooden bar, preparatory to opening the door.

"Reddy!" he whispered, hoarsely. "Sherman fu'st, Stone next, then Cobb, an' this little ole piece o' modern disaster will bring up ther rear."

There was an instant's silence, then the old ranger sibilated:

"Now!"

The next second he hurled open the door, and like a flash Sherman shot out into the night, running for his life!

Straight along the shadow cast by the cabin sped the young fellow, expecting every second to hear the crack of rifles and feel the life-destroying lead.

But nothing of the kind occurred.

The fugitive reached the dense darkness and crouched panting and breathless in the gloom. He was amazed at the failure of his foes to

attempt to take his life. As he crouched close to the ground, he glared around as if still expecting a shot or an attack.

Crouching thus, Sherman dimly saw a dark form leap through the cabin doorway and come racing toward him. The sound of the man's feet on the ground could be plainly heard, and in less than twenty seconds, Eben Stone was by Sherman's side.

Jabez Cobb followed. Then came Old Disaster, running like a deer, despite his age.

The four men moved still further from the burning hut, and finally crouched close by several large boulders, some distance down the ravine.

"Thet 'ar beats me!" admitted the old borderman.

"Me, too," said Cobb. "Whar are ther dirty varlets?"

"You tell," was Disaster's peculiar reply.

"It must be that they were taken by surprise at our early evacuation of the cabin," observed Sherman.

"Thet's it," grunted Stone.

Then the four were silent again as they watched the flames, which had now secured a firm hold on the doomed hut.

"Are you goin' ter be druv out o' hyer by these measly curs, pard?" Old Disaster finally asked.

"Not much," was Stone's quick reply. "We're not goin' ter give up thet thar placer while it pays like it does now."

Cobb uttered a growl expressive of a similar sentiment.

"But w'at are ye goin' ter do fer er place ter bunk?"

"We've slep' under ther stars lots o' nights," said Stone. "We kin build some kind o' er camp out o' bresh."

"But hain't ye goin' ter lose consider'ble stuff by ther fire?"

"Not much. All our tools are down by the sluices. They're all right of ther critters w'ot fired ther cabing don't find 'em."

"Ther chances are that they won't," said Cobb, "fer I gathered 'em up an' chucked 'em inter er place whar I guess they'll be safe."

Fiercer and fiercer became the fire, until the whole cabin was wrapped in flames. With a feeling of mingled rage and regret, the two miners saw their late home destroyed by the fire fiend. Finally the walls fell in with a crash, sending thousand of sparks upward into the darkness.

The four men held a consultation and decided to leave the ravine. A few minutes later they were stealing silently away through the darkness.

Onward they went for nearly an hour, leaving the ravine and continuing through the hills.

They were skirting the brink of a precipice looking for a favorable camping-place. Old Disaster was several feet in advance, when suddenly a dark form rose up before the old man. In an instant they clinched, and the old borderman cried:

"Red-skins, by ther sword o' Goliath!"

A fierce struggle followed. Round and round whirled the two foes, locked fast in each other's embrace. Stone sprang forward to aid the old man, when suddenly the combatants lurched forward and plunged headlong over the precipice!

A wild scream that cut through the darkness came from the red-skin's lips as he went plunging downward.

The yell was answered by a score of cries on all sides of the startled whites.

"Pards," sibilated Stone, "Ole Disaster has gone to his death, an' we are surrounded by red varmints!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CAPTIVE MAIDEN.

FOR a moment after Stone's startling declaration the three men crouched in their tracks, uncertain what move to make. Every hand sought a weapon, and each man resolved to make a desperate struggle for life if an encounter with the Indians ensued.

The sound of advancing feet was heard on the left.

"This way!" hissed Stone, and crouching low, he led them onward.

Every man stepped as lightly as possible and kept constantly on the alert for foes. Like black shadows, cut from a still darker night, they glided through the gloom. Each moment they expected to hear a cry that would tell of their discovery by the red-skins.

Finally they paused beneath some overhanging branches.

"Hark!" whispered Sherman.

They listened, and again the tread of advancing feet was heard directly in front of them.

"Down!" breathed Stone, and silently the three sunk to the ground.

Onward came the soft footsteps, and like grim phantoms of the night, five dark forms stole by them so near that Jabez Cobb could have touched their legs with his right hand. Away into the darkness fled the eluded warriors.

Then the three whites arose to their feet, and without a word, crept onward through the night.

Once Sherman stepped on a rolling stone and nearly fell to the ground. Not a sound came from the lips of either Stone or Cobb as they silently continued onward. Mentally berating the luck, Sherman followed.

Finally they paused again and each man strained his ears to hear any alarming sound.

All was silent save the faint whisper of the night-wind amid the leaves above their heads.

"Guess we've got shut o' ther varmints," whispered Cobb.

"No tellin'," was Stone's soft response. "We're apt ter run inter a hull nest o' ther p'izen critters afore we know it."

"Ther durned skunks was all round us," said Cobb. "We kem nigh gittin' inter a stew."

"Poor Disaster!" came from Stone's lips. "He struck his last disaster that time."

No one spoke, for their hearts were filled with sorrow by the sudden death of the brave old man.

After a brief consultation they started onward with Cobb in advance. The big miner thought that he could lead them to a safe camping-place. For reasons of his own Stone fell back to the rear.

But they were not yet out of danger.

Suddenly Cobb was confronted by a dark form, and in an instant he knew that it was an Indian.

Like a flash the miner's hand shot out and his muscular fingers closed on the throat of the red warrior just in time to strangle a warning whoop.

The Indian grasped the wrist of his white foe, and while he endeavored to tear the choking hand from his throat, he flashed out a long knife and struck savagely at Cobb. The miner caught the red-skin's wrist, while he still retained his clutch on the savage's throat.

"No, ye don't, ye p'izen critter!" hissed the big pale-face.

A gurgling sound came from the Indian's throat, as he endeavored to utter the yell which had been blocked by those iron fingers. Back and forth, round and round went the combatants. Neither Stone or Sherman were able to assist their friend, for they could not distinguish friend from foe in the darkness.

The combatants made considerable noise, still Cobb hoped to prevent the Indians in the vicinity from hearing them, and with this object in view he clung tenaciously to the throat of his foe.

Stone followed the writhing, swaying forms, a knife in his hand, but not daring to strike for fear of injuring his friend.

Suddenly both fell to the ground.

A moment later a tall form arose before Eben Stone.

It was Cobb.

"That settles his hash!" muttered the big miner, softly. "He took the hull length o' his own knife w'en he struck."

"Then let's git out o' hyer lively," whispered Stone. "Guess ther red sinners didn't hear ther racket, but this hain't er healthy lokality fer us jist now."

Once more they hurried swiftly and silently onward. They were now more keenly on the alert for danger than they had been before, for they realized that they were liable to find foes in an unexpected spot.

They finally reached a secluded place where they decided to remain for the night. It was a small wooded alcove, separated from a deep defile by a mass of thick bushes.

No camp-fire was built, for they well knew that it might lead their red foes to the spot. While two of them slept, the third kept watch to avoid a surprise by enemies. And thus, taking turns at guarding the camp, the night wore slowly away.

Again Sherman dreamed that his lost sweetheart came to him and beckoned for him to follow her, but when he arose in his sleep and would have left the spot, Cobb, who was on guard, awakened him.

Morning came, and the three men held a consultation to decide on their future movements.

"Have ye any ijee o' strikin' back fur Dismal Gorge?" Cobb asked his partner.

Stone shook his head.

"I hain't jist made up my mind," he admitted. "We've been livin' pritty snug on flour ever since we struck ther spot an' eatin' meat. Sum time ergo I thort o' one o' us strikin' fer Custer ter bring in rations. All thet kep' me frum speakin' o' it war ther fear thet ef one o' us went we'd be follered back to ther ravine."

"An' w'at do yer think now?"

"As I sed, I hain't jist made up my mind. Ef Jackwood war hyer— But he hain't. I'm jist er leetle puzzled erbout the boyee."

"I think it is our duty to find Old Disaster's body and give it burial," observed Sherman.

"I've been thinkin' o' thet, too. We hev er double objec' fur goin' back ter ther spot whar ther ole man meth his death. He had Jackwood's share o' ther yaller."

"But ther reds are thick as flies in er Floridy swamp," said Cobb.

"Ther varmints hev got inter this lokality, an' we may hev further trubble wi' 'em," was Stone's opinion. "Et will be strange ef they hain't foun' Ole Disaster's boddy an' sacked both ther gold an' his skulp. We may fin' it diffikilt ter keep our own hair on our cabezas."

"Ye're right thar, pard," drawled the big miner. "But I'm of ther youngster's 'pinion— le's find ther ole man an' bury ther boddy. It makes no difference ef ther critters hev sacked ther yaller an' tuck his skulp, we shell be doin' our duty ter ther dead."

Stone was silent for a few moments; then he lifted his head and said:

"I guess thet's what fer us ter do. Arter we hev buried ther boddy o' our ole frien', we'll try ter find Jackwood, though jess ez likely ez anyhow he's run ergin' ther reds an' lost his skulp. I can't understan' w'y ther lad shied off ez he did."

"No more do I," admitted Cobb.

Sherman knew well enough, but he remained silent.

"We mus' keep er sharp eye out fer Injins," continued Eben Stone. "Ef we war ter run inter er nest like thet one las' nite, they'd do us up in ther daytime. We must steer shut o' 'em."

A few minutes later the three men left the secluded spot, and, Stone leading, retraced the course they had traveled the night before. They were cautious and wary, keeping under cover when they were able to do so.

Stone seemed to know every rod of the ground which they had traveled in the darkness, and at no time was he at fault on the course to pursue. With the ease of a born guide he led them along. At the proper point he turned into a gorge which would allow them to pass beneath the precipice over which Old Disaster and his red foe had fallen in the darkness.

After a time Stone halted.

"We must be nigh ther spot whar they went over," he announced.

Then they began a careful search for the body of the old borderman. After a short time they found a spot where something had fallen from above. Stone bade his companions remain quiet while he examined the "sign." A moment later he announced:

"Hyers whar they kem over. Hyers blood an' er show thet ther reds hev been hyer afore us."

"But whar's ther boddy?" asked Cobb.

"Tain't hyer."

"Thet's plain ernuff."

"Waal, ther red devils hev been hyer."

The three men looked into each other's faces as if seeking to read the truth there.

"Perhaps he is not dead," ventured Sherman.

Cobb pointed upward.

"Look thar."

Sherman looked and saw the edge of the precipice over which the struggling foes had plunged in the darkness. It was a terrible fall, and he no longer doubted the old man's death.

A short distance below the brink of the precipice the bank sloped outward and was covered with a few scrub bushes and some vines. Down through these bushes and vines, as they slid along the sloping bank, the combatants had plunged, and now the "path" that they made could be plainly seen.

"No," said Stone, decisively, "thar hain't no hope thet Ole Disaster warn't kilt. As fer ther boddy, ther reds hev did suthin' wi' it."

After a short time they decided to continue onward down the gorge.

They had reached a bend in the ravine, when Stone, who was in advance, leaped backward with a low, startled exclamation.

"Injuns!" he ejaculated.

Cautiously they peered ahead and saw coming

toward them five mounted warriors, and in their midst a captive.

The last was a white maiden!

The moment Sherman's eyes rested upon the red-skinned captive he became excited. As they approached his excitement increased.

By main force Cobb dragged the younger man back so that there would be no danger of his being seen by the Indians. As he did so Sherman gasped:

"God in heaven! I believe that is Amy, my lost darling!"

CHAPTER XIV. REUNITED LOVERS.

"To kiver!" hissed Eben Stone.

Thick bushes were near at hand and into those Stone glided.

"Never!" gasped Sherman, endeavoring to break from Jabez Cobb's detaining grasp. "I will save her or die in—"

"You'll never save her this way!" growled the big miner, in a low tone.

But Sherman seemed deaf to reason. The excitement of the unlooked-for discovery had robbed him of his usual cool judgment.

"Let go!" he commanded, hoarsely, "let go, man! If you want to run from a few savages, go! I shall rescue that girl!"

"Ye won't do northin' o' ther kine!" retorted Cobb, looking the excited young man fairly in the eye. "If you w'd save her, listen ter reason. Ther hain't no show ter resky her by jumpin' out an' lettin' ther reds drap ye. Ef we git ter kiver hyer we can lay low an' drap two or three o' ther varmints when they cum erlong."

Sherman hesitated.

"No time ter lose," breathed Cobb. "Don't be er fool! I'll 'gree thet we'll save her ef ye act sensible. Foller Stone."

The young man's better judgment—or rather, Jabez Cobb's better judgment—prevailed over the thoughtless impulse of a hot-head, and quickly he followed Stone into the bushes. Soon all three of the men were crouching just beyond a mass of branches which would conceal them from the eyes of the Indians.

Both Stone and Cobb possessed Winchester rifles, carrying sixteen cartridges in the magazine. Sherman was armed only with the revolver which Stone had placed in his hand as he was about to leave the burning cabin the night before.

"Are ye er dead shot?" asked Cobb.

Sherman shook his head, and it was evident that in his present excited condition he could not shoot anyway.

"Then don't ye use thet weppin," warned the big miner. "They'll be pritty nigh, an' ye might spot ther gal. Stone an' I will 'tend ter ther Injuns. You keep cool an' lay low. They'll think er reg'lar cyclone hes struck 'em."

"Hush up!" admonished Stone.

In silence the three awaited the appearance of the unsuspecting red-skinned. Soon the steady tramp of horses' feet could be heard, and the rifles in the hands of Stone and Cobb stole to their owners' shoulders.

A moment later the Indians came in view.

Three were in advance and the captive rode between the two which brought up the rear.

"Take ther leader," whispered Stone. "I'll drap ther one ter ther right o' ther gal."

"Kirect."

"Reddy then; one, two, three!"

At the final word both rifles sounded like the report of one. The Indian near the girl plunged headlong to the ground; the other uttered a shriek, threw up his arms and fell upon the neck of his horse; then the frightened animal went galloping up the ravine, bearing a lifeless burden.

With incredible rapidity Stone worked his rifle, and a second shot followed his first. This time he dropped the other savage on the further side of the girl.

Cobb was not far behind, but in the excitement of the moment, he only inflicted a harmless flesh-wound. Like a flash the two remaining Indians disappeared behind their horses and the animals dashed away up the ravine. Stone sent a shot after them which brought down a horse, and Cobb redeemed himself by dropping the running red-skin.

Ere this Sherman had left the cover of the bushes, and was fortunate in securing a hold upon the bridle of the horse ridden by the maiden. In another instant he had the animal under control.

"Amy!" he almost shrieked, as he gazed into the white face of the rescued girl. "It is, thank God!"

"Ethan!" gasped the girl.

She could say no more, and when Sherman drew forth a pocket-knife and cut the cords which bound her upon the horse's back she fainted in his arms.

Stone was careful that the horse did not escape, and Cobb turned his attention to Sherman and the maiden. The young man was covering the beautiful face of the unconscious girl with kisses, while he moaned:

"Dead, dead, my darling! You have hit her with those accursed bullets! Dead, dead!"

"Shucks!" drawled the matter-of-fact Jabez Cobb. "She hain't dead no more'n I be. Ther gal's fainted."

The big miner soon succeeded in convincing Sherman that the girl had indeed swooned. Crouching, the young man held her head in his lap, while Cobb produced a flask of liquor.

This Sherman seized and poured a few drops between the unconscious girl's lips. Then he began chafing her wrists, and in a moment or two she uttered a faint, fluttering sigh, her eyes unclosed, and she looked straight into the blue orbs of her lover.

She knew him, and a look of unutterable joy transformed her face.

"Ethan!" she softly breathed.

He bowed his head until his lips were close to hers as he answered:

"My darling!"

For several moments they were silent, gazing into each other's eyes, down into their very souls. They saw nothing but true love, undying devotion.

"Oh, my loved one!—my heart's treasure!" he murmured. "I can hardly realize that this great joy is mine! It seems that I must be dreaming. I have often seen you in my dreams, but truly this is no hallucination. I hold you in my arms—close to my heart! We will never part again!"

And she replied:

"Never, Ethan!"

He knew then that she had never been untrue to him. Whatever had happened was beyond her power to control, and by no word or hint should she know that he had ever doubted her for an instant.

"I thought you dead," he said, still gazing upon the strange beauty of that pale face. "At times I have felt certain that you were, and have been ready and willing to lie down and die myself. I have sought danger, courted it; but something has preserved me for this the happiest hour of my whole life."

"And I—I have thought—"

She faltered. How could she tell what she had thought during the long, dreary weeks that she had received no word from him? How could she tell of her heartache and doubt? No, no! She could not!

He saw the strange look on her face, and, with quick intuition, interpreted it aright. His own experience told him what she had thought, and although for an instant it gave him a heart-pain, yet he was ready to check the words which might cause her an unpleasant thrill.

"It is all right now," he smiled. "Sunshine comes after shadow, little one. We have found the blessed sunshine at last, thank Heaven!"

"But I didn't know—perhaps you were dead."

"And at times I thought you must be. They told me that you were with the train destroyed in the Red Canyon massacre."

"And so we were."

"Yet you escaped."

"Yes, father and I. I know not how it came about, for I had been struck senseless during the wild, horrible excitement. When I recovered I was with him. He had been wounded on the head, and was weak from loss of blood, but in some way he had saved himself and me from the slaughter. He must have carried me in his arms very far. The blow on the head had affected him strangely, and at times he is delirious."

"Then he still lives?"

"Yes; since then we have been living in a great cave not far from here. Nothing would induce father to leave these parts until he wreaks revenge on the man who led the wagon-train into the trap—Marshal Baylor."

"Marshal Baylor!" cried Ethan, remembering what he had heard concerning his sweet-heart's wealthy suitor.

"Yes—a vile creature who deluded my father into believing that he was a fine gentleman. Baylor was in league with the red-skinned, and father says he is a fugitive from justice. Through some treachery to his red allies, he has since been outlawed by them, and his life

would pay the penalty should he fall into their hands."

"Where is this man now?"

"He is chief of a band of desperate men who, father says, are searching for a fabled cavern of gold. There is a passage that runs from the cave which we occupy to a place where we can look down into the cavern where they are. An old passage of the cave which they occupy has caved in, and they are blasting through, hoping by following the closed passage to reach the fabled Gold Cave."

"And you and your father have lived within a cavern ever since the Red Canyon massacre?"

"Yes. Father has been away twice for a week at a time. I think he must have gone to some camp, as he returned with clothing and provisions."

At that moment Stone announced that they must be moving. The horse was ready for Amy, and Sherman lifted her tenderly and placed her upon the animal's back.

"Whither are we going?" the young man asked.

"Back with me, surely," said the girl; "back to the cave. You will be safe there."

"Waal, we mus' git somewares durned soddint," drawled Cobb. "One o' them measly red dogs got erway, an' we'll hev er passel o' ther varmints enter our trail afore shortly."

They decided to return the girl to her cavern home and at once set out, resolved to delay no longer in reaching a place of safety. As they moved along Amy told them how she was captured by two warriors while only a short distance from the secret entrance to the underground passage.

They hastened onward until the sun was high in the heavens. Finally they entered Dismal Gorge, and when they reached the spot where the path ran down the steep bank, Sherman recognized the place. He told the girl how he had heard the voice in song, and she acknowledged that she had heard him call her name, but had been too frightened to respond.

The miners were delighted to learn that the cavern was located so near the spot where their cabin had stood.

While Cobb sought a place to conceal the horse, the others waited by the entrance to the great cave.

Cobb finally returned, and one by one they disappeared into the passage, the girl closing the secret door which her father had constructed.

CHAPTER XV.

JACKWOOD TAKES A HAND.

JACKWOOD was amazed when he discovered that the mysterious boy of the scarlet sash had vanished. He looked around in every direction, half-expecting to discover him a short distance away, but no such sight rewarded his gaze. A look of bitter disappointment shadowed the young miner's face.

"Gone!" he muttered. "He has left me."

He noticed the disappointment apparent in his own voice and laughed shortly.

"Why should I care?" he asked himself. "He was nothing but a stranger boy; yet I do care. I like his face. There is something bewilderingly attractive about it that I cannot fathom. But I am more than half-angry at the way he has deserted me."

He still gazed backward longingly, faintly hoping that Scarlet Sash would appear.

"There is something unfathomable about the lad's face—something nameless. Were he a girl, I might know what to think; but now I hardly fancy that I am in love with an unknown boy."

Jackwood laughed. Surely the idea was quite ridiculous.

"What shall I do? I have a desire to turn back and try to find the boy, but I fancy that is not the best move to make. Perhaps I had better capture the horse. Then I will turn back, and possibly I may find little Scarlet Sash."

Slowly he approached the feeding horse. The animal lifted its head with a sudden snort and regarded him steadily.

"I shall have trouble in catching the beast," thought Jackwood.

But the feat was even more difficult than he thought. When he had approached a little nearer, endeavoring to attract the white horse with softly-spoken words, the animal wheeled swiftly and went galloping away.

Jackwood uttered an exclamation of disappointment and anger.

"Confound the beast!" he cried. "I'll bet he'll lead me a chase."

And lead him a chase the white horse did. Whenever he would approach within two or three rods of the feeding animal, it would dash

away with a twinkle of heels. Finally it passed him and galloped back toward the defile.

"Go it!" growled the young miner, in disgust. "I won't spend my time in chasing you. Just now I'm hungry enough to eat anything. I must find game of some kind."

He continued onward.

After a time he succeeded in securing some small game, and soon built a fire and cooked it. When he had appeased his hunger he turned to retrace his steps to Dismal Gorge.

Slowly the day slipped by, and after a time Jackwood was forced to acknowledge that for once in his life he had lost his way.

Night came.

The young miner was still tramping aimlessly onward, completely at fault which way to turn.

That night he camped alone in a secluded spot.

Early the following morning he again started in search of the ravine where his companions were.

"I reckon I can find that place after a time," he mused. "I never got shifted so before. It was all caused by that boy and the white horse. Can it be that that lad is my evil genius?"

The forenoon was well advanced when he finally reached a locality that was familiar. He then hastened forward and was soon descending into Dismal Gorge.

"I shall get along in time for dinner," he laughed, "and I'm mighty hungry, too. If it was not for that I might hesitate about returning until Ethan Sherman left, for he is probably there."

Jackwood's amazement when he came in sight of the faintly-smoking ruins on the spot where the cabin stood the day before can better be imagined than described. He stopped and stared at the blackened embers in astonishment.

"What in the name of sin does this mean?" he ejaculated.

He passed his hand over his eyes as if to brush away the surprising vision, but when he looked again the black ruins were still there and a faint mass of thin blue smoke was rising slowly into the air.

"Well, I'll be shot!" burst from his lips.

Then he advanced a few steps and paused again. He glanced around, vaguely searching for some token that would explain the amazing vision. He saw nothing but the same narrow ravine, the deserted sluices, and the remains of the destroyed hut.

"Burned out! This gets me! What has happened here while I have been away from the spot? Where are my pards? Old Disaster and Ethan Sherman should be here, too. Indians! That must not be it."

He examined everything critically.

"If it is the work of the reds, then the boys got away, for there isn't a body here."

Perhaps the red-skins had been beaten off and the survivors had buried whoever was killed. He thought of that and began to look for new-made graves, but found nothing.

"If Indians have been here, they have not accomplished much save to destroy the hut," was his mental decision. "There are no mutilated bodies, no graves, and—"

A sudden terrible thought came to him. What if they had all perished within the burning cabin? Swiftly he rushed toward the ruins.

For thirty minutes he inspected the smoldering remains of the old hut, and finally decided that his fears had been groundless. Then he sat down to consider what move it was best to make next.

"I wonder where Stone and Cobb have gone?" he asked himself. "They may be somewhere in this vicinity, and they probably have my share of the gold with them. I must find them, but which way shall I turn?"

This was a poser.

For ten minutes he thought over the situation, then he arose, decided on making his way up the ravine. He would go to the spot where Sherman fancied he had heard Amy St. Orme's voice.

Jackwood walked slowly along with his head bowed until he was aroused by the sound of voices at a distance. He looked up, and to his amazement saw several masked men standing near the waterfall. He knew instantly that they were not his friends, and swiftly he leaped behind a boulder near at hand.

Fortunately the young miner had not been perceived. The men were so excited about something that none of them had observed him.

He peered forth from his place of concealment, and, to his amazement, saw in the midst of the masked men the boy, Scarlet Sash.

One of the men was standing in front of the lad, gesticulating and speaking earnestly.

"Ah!" exclaimed Jackwood; "now I under-

stand the boy's remark concerning 'the men.' That is the very gang that has been working the secret mine somewhere near this spot, and if I am not dreadfully mistaken, there is an entrance to that mine in the vicinity of yonder waterfall."

He listened, but could not understand what the men were saying. However, he ascertained that the man who was talking to the boy was accusing him of something. The boy replied defiantly. Hot words followed, and then the man struck the lad a sharp blow with his open hand. The boy was staggered and fell upon his knees, putting up his hands as if to protect his face from a repetition of the brutal blow. Then he sprang to his feet, and his shrilly-spoken words came to Jackwood's ears:

"You are no father of mine!"

The man laughed harshly, and again advanced toward the shrinking lad.

"It is time for me to take a hand in that little game," observed Jackwood, as he arose and swiftly advanced toward the throng.

"I lay no claim to you, you little brat!" snarled the brutal man.

"But you have always said you were my father," came slowly from the boy's lips.

"Well, I deny it now. Your parents are dead. You were left in my care by your father at his death."

"Then don't you dare ever lift your hand against me again!" cried the lad.

A repetition of the cruel laugh came from the man's lips, and he advanced threateningly toward Scarlet Sash.

"Hold!" came sharply from the lips of Justin Jackwood, as he confronted the masked man, his cocked rifle covering the threatening individual's breast.

"Don't you dare to lay your hand on this boy again!"

An astonished oath came from beneath the mask.

"Who in sin's name are you?" demanded the startled man, as he recoiled a step.

"My name is Jackwood," was the cool reply; "and I am here to see fair play."

Once more the man laughed.

"You're a jack-mule," he sneered; "and you have stuck your nose into the fire this time."

Then the rifle was thrust aside and Jackwood received a heavy blow on the back of the head, which knocked him at full length upon the ground.

CHAPTER XVI.

WITHIN THE GREAT CAVE.

GUIDED by the girl, the two miners and Ethan Sherman made their way into the hermit's cave.

Reaching the round chamber, they found the few remaining brands of a fire within the natural fire-place.

The girl procured a light, and the men gazed around them in surprise. They noted the few rude pieces of furniture which the cavern contained, and Sherman's sharp eyes espied a dark form reclining on the fur-covered couch.

"Who is that?" he asked.

Then the light fell full upon Junardo's face, and Sherman fancied that he recognized the man, despite the absence of the false beard which the unfortunate had worn.

"Great heavens!" cried the young man. "Can it be Junardo? They told me he was dead—murdered!"

"I still live!" said the hollow voice of Albion Junardo. "My worst, most deadly foe has had his fingers at my throat and driven his knife into my bosom, but I still live."

Sherman was amazed and delighted. He sprang to the side of the cot, exclaiming:

"They said that I did it—I was accused of murdering you!"

"You are not my foe," said the wounded man, slowly, "but my deadly enemy was in that camp that night, and I knew him not until I awoke with his fingers fastened on my throat. Then I knew him, but I was helpless in his murderous grasp. My strength left me; I could not breathe; he struck me with a knife; I knew no more."

"Who did it?" demanded Sherman.

"Braman Arcly."

"Braman Arcly?" repeated Ethan, puzzled.

"Yes; that is his true name. He called himself Flavus Stokes."

"Ah!"

Sherman was surprised, yet more than once had he suspected that Stokes had committed the red deed that fateful night. Stokes had been left on guard. He told Old Disaster that he fell asleep, but in truth he did not sleep a minute during the entire night.

He had seen Sherman leave the camp, and finding the young man's knife where he had lain, he improved the opportunity to dispose of his foe and at the same time make it appear that Sherman did the crime.

"The villain failed in his work," said Junardo, with an effort. "I shall yet wreak vengeance upon him! He shall not escape me!"

"How I came within this cavern I cannot tell. Only a short time ago I became conscious of my surroundings. I am much in debt to the friend or friends who brought me here and nursed me back to life."

Sherman sat down beside the couch and told the wounded man a portion of his adventures. Amy told Junardo how he came to be within the cave, and learned that her father had been absent from the chamber since the wounded man's return to consciousness and reason.

"He is searching for me!" she cried. "He has missed me! Oh, may Providence cause his swift return!"

"Amen!" said Sherman, softly.

Amy's prayer was soon answered, for in less than thirty minutes the white-bearded hermit stood within the cavern. He started back in amazement on seeing the strangers in his underground home.

"Who are these?" he demanded, in a deep voice. "How dare they invade my sacred home?"

For an instant the fire of a madman was in his eyes.

Amy darted swiftly forward and laid one soft white hand on his arm.

"They are friends, father. They rescued me from the hands of the terrible red-men who were carrying me from you forever."

He folded her tenderly in his arms, and placed a kiss upon her forehead.

"Saved my daughter from the red demons? I missed you, dear, and have searched for you. Were you a captive in their blood-stained hands?"

"Indeed, I was, father, and terrible might have been my fate had not these brave men rescued me and slain my captors."

The hermit turned toward his visitors.

"You are welcome, gentlemen; and I have to thank you for saving my child from the hands of those inhuman fiends. She is—"

But there he paused. His eyes fell upon the form of Ethan Sherman, and a strange light came into their dark depths. He faltered, half-shrunk away, then strode forward a step, pointing toward the young man.

"You here?" he said, speaking in a low yet piercing tone. "Where is your knife?"

Ere Sherman could reply, the strange man continued:

"It is here!"

Then he held up the knife which he had removed from Junardo's breast.

"You do not shrink back; you do not even turn pale," added the hermit; "yet this knife was taken from the breast of one who was nearly dead—murdered!"

"He did not sheathe it there."

The words came from Junardo's lips, and for the first time the white-bearded man noticed that his patient was not only conscious but rational.

"It was my most deadly foe who struck me with that knife," declared Junardo. "In no way is this young man guilty."

The hermit dropped the knife, and stepped toward Sherman with his right hand outstretched.

"Thank Heaven! that doubt is removed from my mind," he said.

They clasped hands heartily, and Amy's eyes beamed with joy, for she now knew that her father would not stand between her and Ethan Sherman.

Ethan introduced Minos St. Orme—which was the hermit's true name—to the miners, Stone and Cobb.

An hour was spent in conversation, then the hermit arose and bade his three visitors follow him. He took a light and led them along a narrow passage which seemed to penetrate far into the earth. They ascended several difficult places, and finally St. Orme set down the light, saying softly:

"Follow me. One of you keep near enough to touch me. Make as little noise as possible, and repress an outcry at anything which you may see."

Silently he led them onward for a short distance, and when they paused they found themselves gazing downward through an opening considerably more than large enough to allow the passage of a man.

Despite St. Orme's warning, each of them came near uttering an exclamation of surprise. They were gazing into a cavern chamber.

Far below the place was dimly lighted and they perceived one or two moving forms.

"That," whispered their guide, "is the great cave of the Black Hills. There is no other equal to it. The fabled Gold Cave is a myth. Those men down there think that this cave is a part of the Lost Gold Cave, and they are blasting through a passage which has fallen in, hoping to find untold wealth in the wonderful chambers beyond. Poor fools!"

For some time they were silent, then Stone whispered:

"Pard Cobb, I kin understan' ther rumblin's now. I'm reddy ter give in thet thar hain't northin' suppnatteral erbout 'em."

"The leader of those men down there," said St. Orme, "is the treacherous fiend who was in league with the red demons that destroyed the wagon-train in Red Canyon. On him shall the hand of vengeance fall. Soon I shall descend into that place by means of a rope-ladder which I have manufactured. When I come away, Marshal Baylor will be no more!"

They shivered at the fierceness of the last words as they hissed from the unseen lips of the wronged man.

Suddenly there was a commotion below. The tread of booted feet over the rocky floor was mingled with the sound of many voices.

The four men gazed earnestly downward and saw a number of masked men enter the cave. In their midst was a prisoner.

It was well for our friends that the masked men were making considerable noise, for a suppressed cry burst from the lips of every man.

"Jackwood!" exclaimed Stone and Cobb in a breath.

"Frank St. Orme!" came from Ethan Sherman's lips.

And the hermit cried:

"My son!"

Behind the masked men and the prisoner came the boy, Scarlet Sash, wringing his hands and weeping bitterly.

"Carry him to the strong cell!" cried a voice which was recognized by both Ethan Sherman and Minos St. Orme.

Then the prisoner was led away.

"The hour of vengeance is at hand!" hissed the white-bearded cave-dwellers. "Something has stayed my hand until now, but the wrath of the Almighty is about to break upon the head of that crime-stained wretch!"

After a time the four men returned to the round cavern-chamber, where they set about laying a plan of action. For two hours, at least, they plotted and schemed. At the end of that time St. Orme announced a determination to again look down into the chamber occupied by the masked desperadoes. Sherman volunteered to accompany him, and the two left the small cave room.

With some interest Stone and Cobb awaited their return.

Thirty minutes elapsed ere the sound of advancing feet came from the passage. A moment later St. Orme and Sherman appeared. The latter seemed considerably excited.

"News! news!" he exclaimed, as soon as he reached the chamber.

"Good or bad?" asked Stone.

"Both."

"Then give us ther bad news fu'st, so thet ther good may take ther taste out o' our mouths."

"Well, then, another friend of ours is a prisoner in the hands of those desperadoes."

"Who?" demanded Stone and Cobb in a breath.

"Old Disaster!" was the astonishing reply.

"What?"

Both men were thunderstruck.

"The old man is alive and well," asserted Ethan; "but is a prisoner in the hands of that lawless gang."

CHAPTER XVII.

A FAIR SAVIOR.

Down through the darkness went Old Disaster, locked fast in the embrace of his red foe. Down along the sloping bank they slid through the bushes and vines which served to partially allay the swiftness of the descent. Finally they reached the lowest point of the slope and plunged over.

A yell of horror went up from the throat of the red-skin as they whirled through space.

Then came a sudden shock!

For five minutes both forms lay perfectly still, seeming lifeless. Then one of them stirred and uttered a groan.

Another minute passed and one of the dark forms sat up with an effort.

"Ghost o' ole Goliath!"

The words came from the lips of Old Disaster. The old Border Nomad was far from dead.

"Waal, ole sinner," muttered the survivor, "ye hev been through ernuther 'tarnal disaster. This warn't quite ser bad as ther time w'en I war run through ther rag-picker in er shoddy-mill. Thet jist eternally tore me all ter pieces. My ole karkiss hung ter ther bones in shoe-strings. This time ther breath war pritty nigh jolted out o' me. Reckon it w'u'd quite been ef I'd struck at ther bottom, but thet red war er nice soft cushion."

The old man chuckled softly as he examined the body of his late foe.

"Dead!" declared the old ranger; "dead as er herrin'! He'd orter known better'n ter tackled er rampin' disaster. It's er sorrerful fac' thet ther varmint didn't hev time ter say over his prayers."

Slowly and with great difficulty the veteran borderman arose to his feet. He rubbed his bruised body and stretched his limbs with a mingled groan and sigh of satisfaction.

"I feel like an ole hoss," he muttered, "but I'll be all rite as soon's I git merself shook inter runnin' order. Thet won't take long. Ther ole man has been through menny er wuss racket 'n this hyer—sorrer o' Sodom, yes!"

Disaster had had a really wonderful escape, but he did not seem to look at it in that light. To him it seemed more like a necessary or matter-of-course occurrence.

"Wonder whar Ole Pillbox is?" he said, as he began to feel around on the ground. "I had holt o' it w'en we kem down, but it slipped out o' mer fingers. Ah! Hyer she be, ther darlin'!"

He uttered a chuckle of delight as his fingers closed upon the barrel of his beloved old shooting-iron.

"Now Ole Disaster are hisself ergain! We're reddy fur ther red varmints, an' we kin wallop several times our weight in 'em."

He paused and listened for every sound that might come from above. Darkness and silence brooded over the Hills. To the old watcher's ears came no sound.

"They're all rite so fur. Ther reds hain't diskivered 'em or there'd been er racket. I reckon we'd run inter er nest o' ther p'izen critters, but Eb Stone kin git 'em out o' thet snap ef any man kin."

For some time Disaster was undecided on his next move, but he finally resolved to make no effort to rejoin his friends that night. He realized that such a move might take him into danger, for it would be difficult to distinguish a red-skin from a pale-face in the darkness.

Slowly he moved from the spot, and, at the first opportunity, left the gorge into which he had fallen. After a time he found a secure spot, far from the ravine, and spent the night there.

When morning came, the old ranger's first move was to attempt to find his friends, from whom he had so unceremoniously parted the night before. He spent several hours in fruitless search, and toward noon turned his face in the direction of Dismal Gorge.

"They will go back thar, arter a time," he decided, "an' I kin quicker hit 'em thet way than sum other."

The sun indicated that midday was past when the Hills tramp suddenly found himself surrounded by masked men. A dozen cocked revolvers were pointed straight at his heart.

"Throw up your hands!" commanded a stern voice. "Hesitate an instant and you die!"

A wild scheme did flash through the old man's head, but he saw the utter folly of resistance, and slowly put up his hands, one of them still holding the long rifle.

"Up they go, pard!" he said, with a lugubrious look. "It lookt ez if this ole blockhead had run chuck ag'in' er reg'ler foreshadderin' o' a disaster—ghost o' Goliath, yes!"

"Secure his weapons," commanded the leader of the masked men.

His order was swiftly obeyed.

"Now bind him hand and foot."

"Howlin' tomcats!" groaned the veteran. "Hev I got ter submit ter sech er condemned outrage? Sorrer o' Sodom!"

Yes; he was forced to submit. They bound him securely, but the end was not yet.

"Blindfold him!"

"Geehosifat!" burst from the borderman's lips. "Are ye goin' ter gag me, too?"

"If you do not keep a silent tongue—yes."

"Then I'm dum' 's er clam. Yer know er clam's 'bout ther dum'mest o' all dum' animals."

Er clam c'u'dn't talk ef it secured er speshal license fur thet puppose. I've of'en thort as how it u'd be er fine thing ef sum wimmin war clams."

"Silence!"

"Thet hain't my name, but I reckon ye'r direc'in' yer remarks torrud me, so ef ye don't ob-jec', I'll make believe I'm er clam."

A heavy blindfold was placed over Old Disaster's eyes. Then he was borne along by four men.

For half a mile at least the old chap was carried in this manner, then they passed a spot where the faint smell of smoke came to his nostrils.

"Ther burnt cabin!" was his mental decision.

A few moments later they halted where the sound of falling water smote on Disaster's ears. He knew well enough that they had reached the waterfall in Dismal Gorge.

Briefly the men spoke in low tones, then they once more went forward. Soon the old borderman was drenched by a mass of water which dashed over him. Then he knew quite well that he was in the cave beneath the waterfall, of which he had been told by Cobb.

He listened. Peculiar rappings and signals were followed by a heavy scraping noise.

"A secret door opening," he thought.

He would have been amazed had he seen what appeared to be a ponderous stone, set in the solid wall, slowly move away, disclosing a dark opening.

Then the masked men and their prisoner entered a secret cavern.

Within the large main chamber the blindfold was removed from the old Hills tramp's eyes, his feet were loosed, and he stood up.

He gazed around with some interest.

He saw the same cavern-chamber, lit by flaring lights that Minos St. Orme and Ethan Sherman were gazing down into at that moment! Little did the prisoner dream that far, far above, hidden by the darkness, but gazing down upon him, was one of his friends of the party who started in search for the Lost Gold Cave.

"Place him with the other prisoner in the strong cell," commanded a voice which Disaster instantly recognized.

"Hullo, Stokesie, thet you?" cried the old man. "So, ole frien's meet ag'in; but, I jist can't shake han's wi' ye, ole boyee, till these gentlemen unharness me grippers. Hope yer won't think I'm incivil nor nothin'."

The man uttered a snarl of rage.

"So you know me?" he cried. "Well, that is all right. Your knowledge shall never do you any good. I am only waiting for the capture of Ethan Sherman, when there will be a grand hanging bee in this very cave."

"Ghost o' ole Goliath!" was all that the old borderman ventured to say.

The masked man waved his hands, and Disaster was led away. One of his guards carried a light. They proceeded a short distance from the main chamber and then halted before a stout wooden door, set in the wall. One of them removed a bar which held this door in place, and, as it swung open, the other thrust the prisoner in. The door was slammed behind him.

"A purty pickle, by ther sword o' Goliath!" growled the veteran. "Ther meachin' curs didn't even untie my han's. What er dod-durned gang o' sneakin'—Howlin' tom-cats!"

The old man stopped suddenly, for he perceived a pair of glowing eyes fastened upon him. He started back in alarm.

"Ah, old man, is that you?" called a familiar voice.

A cry of delighted surprise was the answer.

"Jackwood, by ther sword o' Goliath!"

"Right you are," was the reply. "We are in a tough corner, old man."

"I guess ye'r shoutin', boyee. But are yer grippers unhampered?"

"My hands are free, if that is what you mean."

"Thet's 'bout ther size o' it. Mine are tied up ser tight I can't skeercely wiggle er finger. Jist see if ye kin git ther blamed rope off."

Jackwood did so, and soon the borderman's hands were liberated.

"Thankee, lad, thankee! Now, jist tell us how ye kem ter be in this condemned pickle."

The young man complied, relating his adventures from the time he parted with Sherman and the old ranger until they met within the prisoner's cell of the great cave.

Then Disaster told him of the burning of the hut, meeting with red-skins, and his experience after falling over the precipice with his red foe.

"I got suthin' fer ye, lad—suthin' what yer partners giv me ter took keer on, an' forter-nately ther dirty pirates wi' hidden faces did not diskiver. Hole yer han'; hyer she be!"

And the old borderman placed the leather bags containing Jackwood's share of the gold which had been taken from the placer in Dismal Gorge into the young miner's hands.

Jackwood uttered an exclamation of pleasure.

"Thank you, Disaster, for bringing it to me."

Then a sudden change came into the young man's voice, as he added:

"The chances are that it will never dome any good, after all, for who knows if weshall escape alive from this diabolical hole?"

"I reckon, lad, thet ther chances are ag'in' us ef Stokes carries out his dirty schemes. But we mus' fight fer our lives. W'en they cum ter lead us like lam's ter ther slaughter, ther lam's mus' prove ter be wolves."

Then they set about laying a desperate plan for escape.

The hours slipped by.

Finally the sounds of shouts and songs came from the main chamber. Boisterous laughter resounded through the echoing arches. There were imprecations, yells, and a Babel of noises.

"What does that mean?" asked Jackwood.

"Oh! they are problikely gittin' red dy fer ther barbecue," was the grim response.

Then the two desperate men waited to be called forth to face their doom.

Slowly the minutes slipped by. Half an hour passed. Gradually the sounds of shouts and songs diminished. After a time a dead silence reigned within the great rock chamber.

The prisoners were puzzled.

"Hark!"

The word was hissed from Jackwood's lips.

Soft footsteps were heard beyond the door. Stealthily the bar which held the door in place was removed.

Some one was coming!

"Reddy!" gritted Old Disaster.

In each hand the two men held a heavy stone, prepared to fight for their lives.

The door swung open and both prisoners uttered exclamations of amazement.

Before them, with a light in her hand, they beheld a beautiful girl. She beckoned to them, saying softly:

"Follow me, if you would escape! Every man within this cave is asleep—drugged! We will all go from here forever."

Jackwood was dazed. That voice—that face! Where had he heard the voice?—where seen the face?

But no time was to be lost. Silently they left the cell and followed their guide.

"Keerful!" whispered Disaster to Jackwood.

"This may be a trick!"

Suddenly they were confronted by several dark forms. Then came the click-click of weapons, and a voice cried:

"Halt or die!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

FINAL EVENTS.

"BETRAYED!"

Disaster uttered the word as he crouched to spring upon the forms before them. Jackwood seized his arm.

"Hold—friends!" exclaimed the young miner. And so it proved. They were face to face with the two miners, Stone and Cobb, the strange hermit, Minos St. Orme, and the young gold-hunter, Ethan Sherman!

The hermit advanced toward Jackwood.

"My son," he said, "don't you know me?"

"Father! father! Thank God!"

Their hands met; then, overcome by emotion, the parent folded his wayward but still beloved son in his arms.

Meanwhile Eben Stone was explaining to Disaster the reason of that sudden appearance in the cave.

After a few moments young Jackwood turned to the little knot and revealed his identity, stating that his proper name was Frank St. Orme and that the white-bearded man was his father.

Sherman proposed that, as the prisoners were liberated, they mount the rope ladder and return to the hermit's cavern home.

"When I return, that dastard, Marshal Baylor, goes too," declared Minos St. Orme.

Baylor was found sleeping soundly amid his drunken companions. When Old Disaster saw the man's face, he exclaimed:

"Ghost o' ole Goliath! Ef thet galoot had er

full beard, I'd say as how he war thet condensed rascal, Flavus Stokes!"

A close scrutiny of every face failed to reveal Stokes among the others. Then both Old Disaster and Ethan Sherman decided that the beardless Marshal Baylor must be the villain Stokes. His beard had probably been false.

Leaving the rest of the drugged desperadoes where they lay, the party carried Baylor to the rope-ladder. Throwing the unconscious man over his shoulder, the powerful Minos St. Orme mounted the ladder and disappeared into the darkness. One by one, the others followed.

Frank St. Orme and the beautiful girl who had released Disaster and himself from the cell were the last to leave. After the three had met the rescuing party, Frank found the girl weeping silently. He did his best to cheer her, in a tender, considerate way. His heart was pierced as he witnessed her grief, and he asked the cause.

"Oh, sir!" she sobbed, "I have no friends. The man whom I thought my father is not, and I am alone and friendless."

Frank's heart beat joyfully as he gazed on her beautiful, tear-stained face. Something prompted him to whisper:

"You have a friend in me—a firm, true friend, who will stand by you *always*."

He knew not what made him do so, but he put special emphasis on that last word. She looked up, joyously, into his manly face.

"Oh, thank you!" she murmured, softly.

"You are so kind. I will trust you."

How those low-spoken words thrilled him! What a tremor of delight ran over him! What did it mean? In love? Nonsense! he had known her less than twenty minutes!

When all had left the cave save those two, Frank bound the lower end of the rope-ladder firmly about her waist.

"We will draw you up," he said. "Do not be frightened."

She smiled and held out her hand to him.

"Hasten," she urged. "I am in constant dread lest I shall not escape from this dreadful place."

Tenderly he pressed her fingers. Once more he was governed by an uncontrollable impulse, and, stooping swiftly, kissed her hand. Then he mounted the ladder, leaving her, blushing, trembling, joyous at the foot.

When he reached the passage far above she was drawn up safely.

Frank unbound the rope from about her waist, and, growing rashly bold, aided her along the rough passage, supporting her with an arm about her waist.

Minos St. Orme led the way with a faint, flaring light.

The little cavern chamber was reached, and Amy St. Orme and Albion Junardo welcomed them back. Junardo's eyes fell upon the face of the unconscious man whom St. Orme carried.

"Who is that?" he cried. "Good heavens! It is *Braman Arcly*!"

"Braman Arcly!" echoed St. Orme. "He is known to me as Marshal Baylor."

"An'ther durned lyin' varmint palmed hisself onter sum o' us as Flavus Stokes," put in Old Disaster.

"He is my deadly foe," continued Junardo. "My true name is Ashley Conagan. Years ago that man and I were rivals for the hand of a beautiful young woman. I won her. Arcly swore vengeance and stole our only child—a tiny girl baby—from the cradle. The mother died, and for years I have been hunting Braman Arcly, searching for some tidings of my stolen child."

Out beneath the flaring light came Frank St. Orme and his companion. Ashley Conagan saw her and a shriek broke from his lips.

"Dora!"

Then he added:

"Great God! it cannot be! Child, come here! Who are you?"

The girl was frightened, but she answered:

"I do not know. I have always supposed that man my father, but I now know that he is not."

"Then you are my child!" declared the wounded man, in great excitement. "The very image of your mother! There is no doubt!"

With a glad cry, she sunk on her knees beside him.

She, too, had found a father!

After a moment, Sherman said:

"I now understand why Flavus Stokes was my bitter enemy. Here lies the cause."

He passed an arm around Amy St. Orme's waist, but, in an instant, she sprang away from him and flew toward her brother, at whom she had been staring for several moments.

"Frank! Frank!" she cried. "Is this you? Where did you come from? I could scarcely believe my eyes!"

She clung about his neck, sobbing and weeping for joy; she covered his face with kisses and then nearly swooned dead away.

What a joyful reunion it was!

They remained in the cave for more than a week.

When Flavus Stokes—for it was he—regained consciousness he found himself in the hands of his relentless foes. Great was his amazement and terror, and he was finally made to confess his crimes.

His punishment was then seriously considered and discussed. Finally Minos St. Orme declared that he should be delivered into the hands of the red-skins, to whom he had been a traitor. How this could be accomplished puzzled some of them, but, one day, St. Orme and Stokes left the cave. The latter came back alone, and Stokes was never afterward seen by a white man.

Ashley Conagan improved rapidly, and soon announced that he was ready to start with the party for Custer City.

Frank St. Orme improved every opportunity to be with Fannie Conagan, who, to the surprise of every one, proved to be the supposed boy rider of the white horse, and who had been known as "Little Scarlet Sash." Stokes had forced her to dress thus and to ride the white horse through the ravine nights, hoping in that way to frighten away the miners, who were unpleasantly near.

Ere they left the cave, Frank St. Orme told the maid of the cavern of the shadow which rested above his head. Of course she did not believe him guilty, and promised that, when his innocence was made clear, she would become his wife.

Before going away, some of the party took a peep into the great cave. It seemed deserted. The rope ladder was let down and they descended only to find that it was in truth deserted. The levers and pulleys which worked the huge boulder at the entrance beneath the fall were broken and the rock could not be moved.

When they left the cavern, Minos St. Orme showed them a fuse with one end buried in the solid rock near the secret door. After all were out, he lighted this fuse and followed. Soon after a terrific explosion was heard, that fairly made the earth tremble.

"That seals the great cave forever!" said St. Orme.

His words were true, for, to this day, no man has rediscovered and again entered the wonderful place.

Stone and Cobb accompanied the party to Custer, which was reached in safety. The two miners, securing provisions and supplies, returned to Dismal Gorge, but Frank St. Orme did not accompany them.

Doyce Bradon, the bank-robber, died in prison, but in his last moments cleared away every suspicion of guilt that hung over Frank St. Orme's head, by revealing the names of his accomplices, and making a sworn statement that Frank was in no way connected with the affair.

Then, of course, Frank and Fannie were married. It was a double wedding, for Ethan and Amy joined hands at the same time.

Old Disaster was present and danced jubilantly during the festivities which followed. Despite his age and the "terrible disasters" through which he had passed, the old man was remarkably spry and "light on ther hoof," as he expressed it.

Minos St. Orme and Ashley Conagan went into business together. St. Orme's strange wild spells vanished, never to return, and in a few years both he and Conagan laid by enough to retire from business and enjoy life.

Eben Stone is dead. He never succeeded in securing a fourth fortune; but Jabez Cobb made a lucky strike, and is now taking life easy.

Old Disaster is still living, and declares that he is good for a long time to come.

THE END.

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